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# Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Narrative Fallibility, and the Young Adult Reader

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**Abstract:** *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon presents a remarkably complex narrator, 15-year-old Christopher Boone. Due to his implied autism spectrum condition, Christopher is possibly the ultimate in "reliable" narrators: he struggles to articulate emotions and is incapable of telling or understanding lies. His point of view (POV) is an extreme form of first-person limited, with Christopher at times seeming (or even yearning) to be more computer than human. The limitations of Christopher's experience are reflected in his narrative self-presentation, and while, ordinarily, these would damage any sort of achieved authority, they instead underscore the book's powerful thematic messages. Christopher's narrative fallibility echoes the developmental stage of its crossover young adult (YA) audience: *Curious Incident* works with fallibility to establish a strong narrative voice that inspires an empathetic connection between Christopher and his implied reader. This article therefore considers how narrative fallibility is linked to constructions of adolescence in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and further explores the relationship between the narrator and the implied reader(s). Positioned within narratology-based theories and secondary research on Haddon and representations of neurodiversity in YA literature, it provides guidance for teachers and scholars who might question the value of authenticity in this or similar novels.

**Keywords:** narratology; YA fiction; fallibility; authenticity; neurodiversity



**Citation:** Hanssen, Jessica Allen. 2024. Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Narrative Fallibility, and the Young Adult Reader. *Literature* 4: 135–146. https://doi.org/10.3390/literature4020010

Academic Editors: Sarah Hoem Iversen and Brianne Jaquette

Received: 5 April 2024
Revised: 18 May 2024
Accepted: 21 May 2024
Published: 27 May 2024



## 1. Introduction

This article considers the ways in which narrative fallibility might be linked to constructions of adolescence, with the novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon 2003a) as a basis for specific analysis and discussion, and presents implications about the representation of neurodiversity in young adult (YA) literature for use in teaching English in a first-language context (ELT) and also in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms more broadly. Consideration of narrative fallibility and how it potentially affects a given text's interpretation by its audience, especially its implied reader(s), is an ongoing concern within contemporary narratology. (Booth [1961] 1983) opened a robust debate among narratologists on narrative reliability in literature that has since expanded into numerous tracks. Scholarship within this critical school considers, for example, natural vs. nonnatural narratologies (Fludernik [1996] 2005; Richardson 2006), the construction of narrative reliability (Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002; Phelan 2005), and the impact of paratext (Genette 1997) on a work's interpretation and meaning.

*Curious Incident* definitely meets the established criteria for a successful YA novel, almost as though by design, and yet Mark Haddon himself has stated his intention that the novel was for adults; it was Haddon's publishers who insisted on giving it the "young adult" target marketing treatment. Haddon, an accomplished children's book writer and illustrator before *Curious Incident*, had attempted to write his way with it out of what he termed the "kiddie lit ghetto", (Haddon 2003b) and was almost successful, until his publishing agents decided to simultaneously release his book as a children's edition and an adults' edition, a rare move perhaps motivated by the then-recent success of the "Harry

Potter" series. In England, there is perhaps less of a delineation between the world of children's literature and that of specifically YA literature, which, in American publishing, is generally defined as being for readers between 12 and 18 years old. The cross-marketing of this book as intended both for younger readers and for adults sets up, in "real" life an idea that frequently comes across in theoretical narratology or even reader–response theory, namely that the narrator "speaks" to their audience in different ways with the same words. We are therefore invited by the publication history of *Curious Incident* to consider the narrative's impact on two very different interpretative communities and how the narrative itself perhaps has a stronger thematic impact on one of them, against the stated wishes of its author.

*Curious Incident* was well regarded by literary critics upon its 2003 publication, and received several notable prizes, including the Whitbread and *The Guardian*'s Children's Fiction awards. Since *Curious Incident*'s publication, several critics have further considered Haddon's novel in the context of representation of neurodiversity in YA literature. The general critical reception at and around the time of the novel's publication was that *Curious Incident* represented a landmark text for the inclusion of neurodiverse perspectives in YA and for the neuronovel more broadly. McClimens (2005, p. 24) noted "'Haddon's achievement is to have written a novel that turns on the central character's difference without making that difference a stigmatising characteristic." Simply by recognizing that Christopher's autism specifically, or "the etiology of a neurological condition" in general, is "biological, not moral" (Roth 2009), *Curious Incident* represents a significant move toward the acceptance and inclusion of neurodiversity—in fiction and in real life. The novel was, however, published before the advent of such social media-driven movements as 2014's "We Need Diverse Books" and 2015's #ownvoices, as well as the rise of disability studies; therefore, much of the critical debate on *Curious Incident* in recent years (Abad 2021; Nelson 2022) has centered around whether it is appropriate for Haddon, a neurotypical author, to take on a narratorial point of view (POV) of a person with autism and whether the popularity his work achieved in doing so has limited opportunities for additional representation of autism spectrum voices in YA by authors who also experience such neurodiversity (Abad 2021).

This debate can be more broadly situated within ongoing discussions of the value of authentic text in the EFL classroom (Ciecierski and Bintz 2015; Loza 2018), and whether authenticity of authorial experience plays a role in establishing a text's suitability for classroom work. These are questions working teachers face every day. I recently found myself thus conflicted when asked to teach Katherine Applegate's *Home of the Brave* (2007), for example, an excellent verse novel exploring important themes of migration and inclusion, one which fit my given EFL learning objectives in a compelling way, but one which also fails several such "authenticity" indicators. Expanded ethical concerns are now a part of the discussion of what constitutes an authentic text for English teachers to deploy as a learning tool: Is an "authentic" text still authentic when it is a woman writing from the POV of a boy, or a white person writing from a black person's POV? Does authorial adaptation of a different POV than one's own somehow create an unintended power differential between the author and the narrator? Such debates require some background and great care so that teachers can make informed decisions about how and why to proceed.

## 2. Proposal

My argument is that applying elements of non-natural narratology as an interpretative mode for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* enhances the significance of narrator Christopher Boone's narrative fallibility, particularly in the context of Christopher's adolescence. Narrativity is a process of presentation and interpretation, and takes on a heightened importance when considered in the context of the developing reader. I follow and expand on Richardson's (2006) perspective on fallibility to consider how an adolescent identity can be constructed in YA literature through deliberate attention to narrative fallibility. My analysis demonstrates how Christopher's narrative fallibility—one that is

perhaps unique due to his neurodiversity but also more universally relatable, given his age and life experience—rather than causing discord between the narrator and his implied reader(s), underscores his character's authenticity within his adolescent developmental stage, thus increasing its appeal to its adolescent reader and also reinforcing the idea of empathetic reading that carries throughout the novel. In doing so, my research also unpacks the debates around authorial intention vs. authorial authenticity in the specific context of the continued popularity of *Curious Incident* for use in ELT contexts, and offers contextualization, support, and advice to working teachers who wish to continue using this novel or others like it in light of increased concerns about authenticity and representation in their selected classroom literature.

## 3. Further Implications

To teach the school subject of English as a second language (widely understood as EFL) carries with it an enormous responsibility, for not only are English teachers charged with providing their learners with the basis for learning and, over time, mastering a second language in wide use worldwide and for multiple purposes (King 2018), the learning materials teachers choose to support their language teaching also carry implicit societal values (Hill 1986; Cubukcu 2014). English as a school subject is rapidly becoming a conduit for exploring such values; among the most central values we engage with is that of inclusion. To learn English as a second language is to inherently understand that one would like to be included in a larger community than a purely monolingual one affords, and would like to participate more fully in the eventual betterment of a larger society than one's own through engagement and communication. Since many school contexts either begin instruction in EFL at the beginning of a learner's adolescent years, or continue to expand the subject's functionality at this developmental milestone, teachers must engage their adolescent learners with a special degree of sensitivity and respect. These learners are not only learning the subject at hand but also developing an independent sense of self and their place in the world, and respect and empathy for others and their place in the world. The content of instruction, that is, reading and discussing literature, also becomes the method by which both language and values are learned. In that sense, all English literature classrooms are inherently Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) environments. Sound text selection for the English classroom for adolescent learners would therefore efficiently combine expansion of their English vocabulary, structures, and meaning-making with support for values that are important in the lifeworlds that adolescent learners inhabit and will come to inhabit later. It is my firm belief that *Curious Incident* achieves these things; its engaging murder mystery plot, short chapter sequences, and teenaged homodiegetic narrator all serve to motivate reading. Additionally, many adolescent English learners become increasingly aware of neurodiversity at this age, either through personal experience or through an increased focus on neurodiversity in the media they consume (a consumption perhaps enabled by continued language mastery, as much of the extra-classroom discourse they seek out and participate in, such as entertainment and social media, happens in English). *Curious Incident* can serve as an approachable and entertaining entry point for bringing discussion of neurodiversity into the English language classroom.

Authenticity itself, however, also becomes important at the adolescent stage as a marker of independence and individual personality, both inside and outside of the English classroom. When a teacher chooses literature with the potential to disrupt developing notions about the value of authenticity, one risks dismantling the vital trust relationship between teacher and learner (Platz 2021), which could have consequences for the learner's motivation and the learner's relationship to the subject itself. Great care is therefore required in text selection and methodology, or else teachers risk inadvertently alienating their learners and breaking the hard-won trust relationship. It is my hope that close consideration of how *Curious Incident* functions, both within the text itself and also meta-narratively, to reinforce ideas on inclusion and empathy, might alleviate concerns about

whether the novel's authorial authenticity matters in light of the English classroom's broader aims.

## 4. Demonstration

In Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon 2003a), readers are presented with a narrator, 15-year-old Christopher Boone, who, due to his implied autism spectrum condition, is possibly the ultimate in "reliable" narrators: he is incapable of articulating or interpreting emotions, and incapable of telling or understanding lies. His POV is an extreme form of first-person limited, with Christopher at times seeming (or even yearning) to be more computer than human. Certain limitations in Christopher's experience are reflected in his narrative presentation, and while, ordinarily, these would damage any sort of achieved authority or reliability, these limitations, in fact, underscore the powerful thematic messages of the book. Christopher's fallibility as a narrator adds to the thematic impact of the book in a way that echoes the emotional and readerly instability of its YA audience (to whom this book was co-marketed). One might go so far as to say that this connection between representation and reader is particularly compelling to a YA audience, who are, at that stage of life, more attuned to fallibility than an adult, more relativistic counterpart.

*Curious Incident's* adolescent narrator, Christopher Boone, and his relationship to the implied reader(s) as a reliable narrator, already complicated due to the narrative's complex structure and plot, becomes further complicated once the novel's paratext is brought into play. Paratext, defined by Genette (1997) as the "liminal devices and conventions" (p. xvii) of a book, or its "threshold" (p. 2), which includes inclusions such as prefaces, afterwords, and its title, and also includes elements such as page numbering, typeface, and even its cover. Haddon intentionally plays with paratext, for example, using the device of the chapter numbers being exclusively prime numbers to illustrate Christopher's interest in mathematics.[1] The cover of *Curious Incident*, however, controversially and without Haddon's permission, contains a significant detail, the fact of Christopher's status as having a diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome. As Berger (2014, p. 193) and others have noted, "the term never appears in the novel," and Haddon himself resented its inclusion on the cover, preferring Christopher to meet his reader with "no labels whatsoever" (Haddon 2003b). However, a casual reader buying the book off the shelf, or a teacher presenting it to the class during a pre-reading stage, might too readily latch onto this label as a way of coming to terms with its unusual narration. We need a different way of understanding the challenges Christopher's narration represents, one that defies the reader to understand Christopher purely in terms of a diagnosis that itself is mired in controversy and has no actual place in the novel.

Brian Richardson's 2006 book *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* offers several new ways of grouping and understanding narrative perspectives that fall outside of the already-established homodiegetic framework. Focusing on Richardson's idea of "fallible narration" as opposed to unreliable narration, it is possible to more fully articulate the perceived humanity of the narration in question: the issue is no longer whether a narrator is reliable, but is, instead, how variations in reliability can enhance a reader's appreciation of the narrative and its larger themes.

In cases of extreme narration, according to Richardson, "the narrative discourse thus predicated of the single narrational source far exceeds the standard range of any single human sensibility" (Richardson 2006, p. 86). Clearly, Christopher's narrative discourse falls here: due to his implied autism spectrum condition, Christopher presents possibly the ultimate or extreme in reliable narrators; he is incapable of articulating or interpreting emotions, and incapable of telling or understanding lies. According to Berger, "Christopher—with his resistance to symbolic thinking and ambiguity, his abhorrence at being touched, his difficulties in understanding others' thoughts and feelings—is an extreme example of qualities possessed in lesser amounts by everyone" (Berger 2014, p. 203). Furthermore, Christopher claims hyper-awareness of his surroundings: "I see everything," he states (Haddon 2003a,

p. 174), yet we know instantly that this cannot be so, at least not in terms of narrative discourse, or else the tempo would be stretched indefinitely. He may see it, but he does not and cannot report it. His autism spectrum condition, a barrier which distances Christopher from the world around him, is part of what makes it possible for him to so readily situate himself as a character in his own narrative. Lacking the capacity to see narrative as an introspective process of self-examination, Christopher provides an unusually insightful homodiegetic outlook on the world around him, one that always remains conscious of the production of narrative as having an intrinsic value.

An extreme narration supposes the existence of an extreme reception, in the same way that a funny foot needs a funny shoe. Certain receptive communities have limitations that transcend their ability to understand the words on a page; the YA reader, having reasonable grammar, story, and logical knowledge but still developing a sense of proportion or relativity, is perhaps the most "extreme" type of reader. "The real world is extremely important to these young people" (Bushman and Haas 2005, p. 4), and yet they have experienced relatively little of it for themselves compared with an adult reader, so the narratives presented in books constitute a larger proportional part of their total reading or life experience. *Curious Incident* provides a story that is simultaneously connected to and detached from their experience: "There is much in the text in the constitution of Christopher that works in the way Freud sees the uncanny operating, not as something entirely remote to us but something that is 'strangely familiar' especially to a young adult reader" (Muller 2006). This feeling of liminality between the familiar and the new is certainly part of the novel's appeal to YA readers. There have been numerous surveys conducted to attempt to get inside the minds (and hopefully the wallets) of this reading audience (Nielsen 2022; Wilcox 2019). Teen readers tend to seek out books with first-person POV, not at least because they find it easier to connect more personally with the narrator and, simultaneously, to lose themselves in the narrative. Nikolajeva (2014) partially attributes this tendency to the feeling of independence that reading a first-person POV provides, whereas third-person POVs require more guidance to be able to relate to the story's events. YA readers also gravitate toward books with realistic plots and settings (even a fantasy novel can have a realistic setting if the action that takes place there feels authentic within that context), presents a mystery to solve, and displays strong characterization that clearly outlines a character's motivation for their actions.

As Neil Postman (1982) maintains, there is an inevitable "knowledge gap" (p. 28) between an adult and a younger person, and while it is in the adult's interest to attempt to shield younger people from the world's unpleasantness (p. 9), it is the inevitable business of the young to seek access to the adult world. The teenaged reader of *Curious Incident* is developmentally in the same process of identification with the adult world as Christopher and is thus more inclined to see things his way than an adult reader who has already traversed the "knowledge gap". Irony, perhaps the most nuanced technical literary device to teach, in YA novels or elsewhere, takes on heightened significance in *Curious Incident*, as while the novel's deployment of dramatic irony is practically acute, we must again consider the novel's dual audience and the "knowledge gap" between them in order to understand its ultimate effectivity. An adult reader, well versed in the ways in which the world conspires to kick us in the teeth, will obviously feel much tenderness towards Christopher and his situation, and see not only irony but also naivety, which can easily carry over into the way we understand Christopher as producer of written narrative; we inevitably feel a bit distant from the character because we understand the world he describes in a way that he cannot. The experience of the passage of time is what allows an adult reader to experience this dramatic irony; it is not a part of the YA reader's lived experience to such a tangible extent.

This sense of dramatic and naive irony also arises from the inevitable conflict of the neurotypical adult author attempting to adopt the voice of a 15-year-old boy with developmental issues: "Novels constructed by adults to simulate an authentic adolescent's voice are inherently ironic because a so-called adolescent voice is never and can never

be truly authentic" (Cadden 2000, p. 146). We would expect a YA reader, being closer to the teenaged experience of the world, to have a strong objection to the ways in which Christopher's narration frequently seems inauthentic and might well be more inclined to notice plausible fallibilities in the plot than an adult counterpart. The teen reader, lacking ironic distance from the narrative and seeking alliance with a perceived age peer, is thus quicker to place themself in Christopher's shoes and see the world through his eyes. The same dramatic irony which creates a sense of distance from the narrator in the adult reader thus brings the YA reader closer to him.

As a homodiegetic narrator and thus a creator of his own narrative, Christopher clearly makes narrative choices based on past narrative experiences, implying a larger literary sensibility, whether trained or innate, than he lays claim to. Siobhan, his teacher at his "special" school, often stands in for Haddon's idea of his adult implied reader, and she frequently offers advice to Christopher about how to best shape his narrative. Christopher seems to rely on her advice a lot, enough that one wonders what the narrative would have been like without this mediating presence. In an interview, Haddon himself lays out the central paradox of the fact of Christopher's narration: "If Christopher were real, he would find it very hard, if not impossible, to write a book. The one thing he cannot do is put himself in someone else's shoes. The reader's shoes. You've got to entertain them, and there's no way he could have done that" (Haddon 2003b). Haddon claims to have "solved" this paradox by making Christopher a fan of the "Sherlock Holmes" series, so Christopher plans to write in that style, and *Curious Incident* is its result, but having a mentor text is not the same thing as having empathy or the patience to find exactly the right words to describe what one has seen or experienced. It is clear to even a casual detective fiction fan that Sherlock Holmes, as he is written by Arthur Conan Doyle, could never have written a book about Sherlock Holmes, yet Christopher takes on this challenge, describing so many trees that his audience cannot help but see a forest: "But does Christopher really see and, consequently tell everything? For even though he compares his memory to a film (Haddon 2003a, p. 96)—an originally photographic medium that is often taken to be highly veridical—his autism leads to impairments in perception as well" (Freißmann 2008, p. 400). Christopher's admiration of Sherlock Holmes, we remind ourselves (visualizing, doubtless, the "Chinese box" model frequently used to teach or illustrate focalization), is mediated through both James Watson and Doyle, yet Christopher dismisses Doyle for taking too much interest in the supernatural and Watson, the actual narrator of the Holmes stories, does not rate much mention at all. It is as though, in Christopher's approach to the Holmes series as mentor text for his narrative, Christopher has internalized the idea of "detaching the mind at will" (Haddon 2003a, p. 73), an ability he claims to share with Holmes himself, and is able to write about himself as though he is simultaneously mediated and unmediated Holmes. This would inevitably lead to moments of fallibility, as it is simply too complicated for an inexperienced narrator to consciously and simultaneously create and be created.

Richardson maintains that "[w]e do expect a certain amount of what might be called 'plausible fallibility' on the part of any narrator concerning the precise dates of private events, or any other act or event that depends on memory or involves judgment; in such cases, ordinary fallibility is a sign of verisimilitude" (Richardson 2006, p. 92). Christopher's self-described neurological situation, however, in which his memory works like a DVD player with no buttons but with a "smelltrack", (Haddon 2003a, p. 96) does not allow for plausible fallibility, and this creates an uncanny sense of verisimilitude. His fallibility is his infallibility, but within the precise context of his narration, this is not fallibility but the purest kind of plausibility and strength, amplifying everything we thought we knew about the power of the homodiegetic narrator to create their own universe. Richardson's idea that the narrator's worldview can be taken as a given, as long as it is not contradicted outside of the range of "normal" fallibility (Richardson 2006, p. 92), gains even more traction when considering the plastic mind of a YA reader, which has, developmentally speaking, only recently gained the ability to think forward and backward in time (Bushman and Haas 2005, p. 4). Using Christopher's favorite self-comparison, the computer, we all

know how much faster a computer is when it is new: the more information it contains, the slower its processing speed. Any contradictions in a homodiegetic narrative's plot would therefore stand in starker relief for this newer, fresher YA reader, who would call its narrator's reliability into question quicker than their adult counterpart. The three following examples of this difference of interpretative awareness serve to illustrate this point and contextualize the significance of how who is reading can shape the meaning of Christopher's narrated language.

One of the strangest facts of the narrative is that although it is meant to represent a physical book that Christopher has written, the narrative continues even after Christopher's father finds the book-in-progress, gets into a violent fight with Christopher over its contents, and, as Christopher incorrectly deduces, throws this notebook in the trash outside (Haddon 2003a, p. 104). Now, if we accept that the first-person account he writes really is the novelistic product we read, then the fact of the narrative continuing at all at this point is a logical impossibility. In purely narratological terms, the discourse would outrun the plausibility of its plot. Christopher smooths over this fact, however, by here inserting nine pages of non-plot lexical trivia and another three pages of narration about searching for the book itself, before finding it along with the all-important letters from his mother and putting the notebook away lest it be discovered. He never retrieves the book again, or chooses not to narrate taking it out of hiding and getting back to work on writing it, and yet the book continues. It is "curious" that the plot can continue at all once Christopher has hidden the book from his father. Christopher instead attempts to rationalize his need to continue the narrative:

> I could carry on in another book that I would keep secret and then, maybe later, he might change his mind and let me have the first book back again and I could copy the new book into it. And if he never gave it back to me I would be able to remember most of what I had written so I would put it all into the second book and if there were bits I wanted to check to make sure I had remembered them correctly I could come into his room when he was out and check. (Haddon 2003a, p. 118)

The entire premise of the novel, that it is physically Christopher's creation and documents his lived experience, becomes wobbly at this point: which notebook is *Curious Incident* the representation of? The retrieved first or the imaginary second? This mystery is never resolved. This narrative lacuna is, perhaps, more apparent to an experienced adult reader than to a YA reader, who would be more focused on the excitement and continuation of the plot than the technical formation of it. The style of the narration itself in this section feels very much like the product of a teenager's mind intent on proving something; the run-on sentences echo Christopher's mental stress and make him seem reliably anxious. And yet there is no real logic or resolution to the outcome of this dilemma: the book continues—but how? An adult reader simply has to work harder to suspend disbelief in order to take Christopher's narrative at face value going forward, but has the ability and experience to do so, whereas to a teenaged reader, the situation of the narrative's continuation seems plausible or at least less important, and, like Christopher, they "skip" this part of the plot.

Another example of a plot lacuna based on Christopher's reportage is when, having completed his journey across London via the Underground and is safely at his mother's new flat, he feels threatened by the arrival of his father and prepares to defend himself with his Swiss Army knife, a tool which he always carries (Haddon 2003a, p. 240). First, overhearing a violent argument among his mother, her lover and flat-mate Mr. Shears, and Christopher's father, Christopher narrates that he holds the knife blade out as his father enters his room. It is interesting to note, however, that he does not say at what point he took out the knife, simply that he holds it in case his father grabbed him. Understanding at what exact point he took out the knife might have made a difference to the way his emotional state is understood, yet he leaves this information out of the narrative. He claims, for example, that the argument was so loud that it woke him at exactly 2:31 a.m. (Haddon 2003a, p. 196),

so he is obviously interested in precisely establishing certain situational details, but he never says at what moment he felt threatened enough to pull out a knife. He had, of course, been hit by his father earlier in the novel (again, an act that was not directly narrated but insinuated), so his act of self-defense seems warranted as an outcome of his trauma. A younger reader, trained in children's literature, would be more likely to have immediately identified Mr. Boone as a villain after the fight and would understand more readily Christopher's need to defend himself. However, an adult reader, conditioned by experience, would recognize more clearly that Mr. Boone never meant to hurt Christopher and that that his earlier violent act, however wrong and misguided, was one borne out of extreme fatigue and emotional insecurity, and was a giant mistake in a long context of being Christopher's sole caretaker. Christopher's act of pulling out the knife being undernarrated forces the interpretation that Christopher took it out just after waking up and hearing his father's voice, which suggests that the narrative is here more closely aligned with a teen reader's perspective on the situation.

A third example of Christopher's narrative fallibility and how this is potentially interpreted differently by adult and YA readers comes at the very end of the novel. According to pedagogical approaches to YA literature, "[. . .] most young adults like a neatly tied-up ending—one with closure that provides all the answers so the student is burdened with no more thinking. However, the characteristic of most YA literature is to provide a thought-provoking ending—one that frequently leaves some loose ends for the reader to ponder, question, and extend" (Bushman and Haas 2005, p. 50). Nikolajeva (2005) describes this kind of ending as the difference between closure and aperture, or "an indetermancy concerning what has happened and what might still happen" (p. 103) The ending of *Curious Incident*, with its neatly positive plan for Christopher's future, is highly multivalent, depending on who interprets it. On the one hand, the ending seems to be neatly tied up in a way that young adults, theoretically, should respond to as closure. Christopher narrates with confidence and authority here, certain in the direction that his life will take: he will take and pass his A levels, go on to university, and become a scientist; he can do these things because he solved the mystery of who killed Wellington and can therefore do anything. (Haddon 2003a, pp. 220–21). On the other hand, however, it is that selfsame certainty which calls the plan into doubt, as any self-respecting teen reader would immediately recognize that in a clearly unstable world, and without all the tools for survival at one's disposal, the odds remain stacked. If anything, Christopher's harrowing journey would have exemplified this, not disproved it. For a teen reader accustomed to using bravado to mask insecurities, Christopher's own mask falls away with this ending, exposing his pain: by saying too much, he ironically self-negates the believability of his idea. The Appendix, presenting its mathematical solution to the "Monty Hall Problem" rather than, for example, an account of what Christopher did next, becomes another lacuna-filler, something thrown in as a substitute for actual knowledge or lived experience, such as what was seen in between Mr. Boone disposing of the draft notebook and Christopher's continuation of it.

It is the adult reader who more readily latches on to Christopher's narrative as cheerful reality: we want to believe that all things are possible for Christopher, even though we know they are not. We momentarily allow ourselves the luxury of backing away from an ironic reading of the ending, as thinking about Christopher's actual reality is perhaps too depressing. For this adult reader in denial, the novel's Appendix is a way of prolonging the magic, extending the time between Christopher's buoyantly victorious tone and the day when he is unable to realize his stated goals, in opposition to the way the deployment of such non-plot-driving data previously inspired doubt in an adult reader.

The truth of the ending's interpretation, however, is in what it omits, for when one compares the end of the novel with its earlier incarnation in Chapter 71, in which Christopher states the exact same sentiments, using nearly the same language: "Then, when I've got a degree in Maths, or Physics, or Maths and Physics, I will be able to get a job and earn lots of money and I will be able to pay someone who can look after me and cook my meals and wash my clothes, or I will get a lady to marry me and be my wife and

she can look after me so I can have company and not be on my own" (Haddon 2003a, pp. 57–58). By omitting this part of the plan from its repetition at the end of the novel in Chapter 233—which, considering his supposedly film-like memory itself constitutes an act of narrative fallibility—Christopher recognizes something otherwise unnamable about himself and his situation: that he may well have gained some independence along the way, but this will come with a certain amount of isolation. Christopher must, whether he understands it or not, face his future challenges alone. It is a bleak realization for adult and YA readers alike.

With *Curious Incident*, Mark Haddon thus created an entirely unique narrative challenge: a "perfect" homodiegetic narrator whose fallibilities as a narrator only enhance the verisimilitude of the universe he creates. The challenge is amplified by the idea that we are informed from the start, via the novel's paratext, that Christopher is meant to represent a neurodiverse POV and, from its peritext, that there are two distinct types of actual readers of this novel, each having a different relationship to and understanding of its most singular protagonist. By situating Christopher Boone's narration within the context of extreme narration, and with respect to the multiple interpretative communities for this novel, one can easily see how a younger reader would have a heightened awareness of Christopher's narrative strategy despite having more limited reading experience. An adult reader, more aware of the mechanics of narrative production and the way the "real" world works, is also potentially more willing to allow the implausibility Christopher's narration presents to stand, suspending disbelief in conflict with the lived adult experience.

The question of Christopher's narrative style and fallibility, however, comes with questions about the novel's authenticity as representative of the true experience of neurodiversity. One might be able to demonstrate, as I have done above, in what ways Christopher's fallibility as a narrator enhances his reliability, but can one successfully demonstrate that Christopher's experience is authentic? Critics, especially in recent years, have observed that "the tropes the novel traffics in suggest harm in Haddon's justification for writing an autistic character. Haddon's framing of Christopher as a person who has 'behavioral problems' rather than a single representation of autism drawn from the lived experience of an autistic person closes down the productive avenues of discussion that would otherwise be open with an #ownvoices text" (Abad 2021). Likewise, Nelson (2022) observes that "the (publishing) industry seems to favor novels with autistic characters who reinforce stereotypical autism narratives" (p. 16) and also that "oftentimes when there is a depiction of autism, it does not reflect the diverse population impacted by autism, including gender, race and ethnicity, age, co-occurring disorders, sexual orientation etc." (p. 10). Perhaps they are right to do so: in 2024 and beyond, we can all hope for increased access and publication opportunities for storytellers to relate their experiences and intersectionality as they have lived them. Critique of Haddon's deployment of a neurodiverse narrator when this is not a part of his lived experience, however, can only come out of the realization that, at the time of *Curious Incident*'s publication, neurodiverse narrators were rarely represented at all in popular fiction. In that sense, Haddon's work opened doors that were previously closed. In many 20th-century school contexts, such as that which Haddon describes, learners with documented neurodiversity such as autism spectrum conditions were frequently removed from mainstream schooling altogether, so neurotypical learners had even less access to them or to developing empathy with their situation. Since the publication of *Curious Incident*, great progress has been to integrate learners with various learning disabilities and spectrum conditions into mainstream classrooms, rather than separate them out (Russell et al. 2023, p. 477). I am not sure whether *Curious Incident* has been a direct contributor to that, but it certainly brought the issue to the forefront for YA and adult readers simultaneously. Other fiction has given birth to societal change, for example, *Black Beauty* raised awareness of animal rights, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stands out as a watershed moment for the impact of fiction on emancipation and civil rights for the enslaved. I suspect that future historians and scholars will recognize *Curious Incident* in a similar context. Sewell was clearly not a horse, nor was Stowe an enslaved African person, but they were, through creating convincing

fictional narrators that encouraged empathy among their readership, able to propel change. This brings the discussion back to the problem of power differentials. A white woman writing from the perspective of a horse would not cause underrepresentation of a group that can speak for itself, but we must be considerate of the material consequences of using literature that uses a marginalized narratorial perspective outside of the lived experience that real people might experience and understand differently, and make a plain case for why using the "inauthentic" perspective is worth the risk. Returning to my own quandary about teaching *Home of the Brave*, if I can get my learners to understand forced migration from a more empathetic perspective at the same time that I teach them about poetic meter or imagery, I am far less concerned about the authenticity of the authorial source as I am about the authenticity of the change and growth their work inspires. The material consequence of learning seems more compelling than the risk of offense. The ethical question of Haddon adopting a marginalized voice for Christopher's narration likewise seems less immediately urgent than the need to explore themes of neurodiversity, social inclusion, and economic disparity in a way that learners can relate to and learn from. At the same time, teachers who are aware of the need to promote inclusive learning environments might supplement the use of such texts with additional content or peritext that adds an authentic context to the target fiction or informs it with first-person lived experience wherever possible.

That said, a good novel is a good novel, especially in the context of ELT. If our interest lies within using fiction to enhance knowledge of the English language while carrying messages of societal relevance, authenticity is less important than one might think, or is even unimportant. Haddon' theme is not autism but is rather "the problem of connectedness. Christopher becomes not a case study of autism, but of the attempt to live without bearing another's meaning." (Berger 2014, p. 193). This is a concern that YA readers can, if they cannot yet fully articulate for themselves, at least relate to and empathize with when they encounter it, regardless of placement on a spectrum of neurological ability. An authentic story, in my view, is one that gives its readers the feeling of immersion and that they have gone on a journey and learned from it. Authentic texts give readers the impression of hearing an authentic voice, which is inherently a virtual and inauthentic experience: "If a young reader is able to enter into a becoming with a text, then the voice of the text can indeed be saved" (Newland 2009, p. 10). More than being an attempt to somehow define or co-opt autism spectrum disorder, *Curious Incident* provides readers with a unique construction of adolescence, one represented through fallibility and best understood with a deep appreciation for the nuanced ways in which Christopher's voice represents an extreme narrative POV. It inspires an empathetic connection between Christopher and his readers, who can be further understood as being simultaneously adults and younger readers, thus adding to the novel's eventual impact. With this in mind, any cracks in the "authentic" façade Haddon tries to maintain actually serve to reinforce the challenges Christopher's neurodiversity presents, thus making the story more authentic, not less.

## 5. Conclusions

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon 2003a) was influential in how neurodiversity is represented and understood in children's and YA literature, but it is easy to also recognize its limitations, especially if one considers authorial experience of neurodiversity to be essential for telling a "true" story from the POV of a neurodiverse person. Using Richardson's (2006) idea of narrative fallibility, which arises from a developing understanding of non-natural narratologies, one can see Christopher's narration as less of Haddon's attempt to co-opt a lived experience and more as a successful experiment toward creating a voice that few have heard before, due to the limitations that writing with autism spectrum conditions might present. In this way, the novel's focalization works to center and decenter Christopher's autism; Christopher's problems are both his alone and part of a larger and collective adolescent awareness.

*Curious Incident* is additionally notable for the ways in which peritextual information influences two distinct types of readers, adult and YA, a process which this article has

sought to unpack from a narratological perspective using specific examples. Many authors have written beautifully about what they do not or cannot know for sure, and their words have resonated and connected with their implied reader(s). Separated out from questions of its "authenticity", what remains of value with *Curious Incident*, especially in the ELT context, is that it represents a prime example of a unique construction of adolescence, one represented through fallibility. Christopher's limitations (and possibly Haddon's, too) ultimately work in the favor of storytelling: *Curious Incident* works to establish a strong narrative voice and vision that inspires an empathetic connection between Christopher and his implied reader. The novel's unique position in the marketplace as a "crossover" adult novel with wide YA appeal also works to help younger readers bridge the "knowledge gap" (Postman 1982, p. 28) between their lifeworld and that of adults, with a deeper understanding of and empathy for those who experience neurodiversity being a welcome side effect.

Further research might develop from a more practical perspective and explore ways in which teachers with concerns about authorial authenticity can use secondary readings and resources to supplement their classroom use of a primary text in which this could be problematic or, from a still more theoretical perspective, to explore the narrativized construction of childhood in later neuronovels toward understanding how narratological theories such as non-natural narratology help to showcase the techniques authors use to convey voice in their storytelling.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Note

[1] I first read *Curious Incident* in 2003, shortly after the birth of my oldest daughter, via my public library. Perhaps fatigued from caring for an infant, I distinctly remember being unempathetically angry at the kind of depraved individual who would remove pages from a library book until I caught onto the prime numbers device.

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