Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time was the cross-over publishing sensation of 2003. It has been the subject of widespread critical and commercial acclaim and has won prestigious UK prizes including the Whitbread Book of the Year and the Guardian’s Children’s Fiction Prize. It is still enjoying considerable commercial success in the best-seller lists. This essay reads Haddon’s novel alongside Kevin Brooks’ Martyn Pig (2002), winner of the Branford Boase Award and short-listed for the Cilp Carnegie Medal. Brooks’ hero, Martyn has a troubled teenage life, and like Haddon’s Christopher, he turns to detective fiction in order to shape bis own experience. The essay develops the idea that “every life is in search of a narrative” (Richard Kearney, On Stories, p. 4) and argues that detective fiction, in particular, provides structures that allow Brooks’ and Haddon’s first person narrators to make sense of their confusing worlds.

**KEY WORDS:** Mark Haddon; Kevin Brooks; *The Curious Incident*; Martyn Pig; cross-over fiction; detective fiction.

Christopher Boone is fifteen. He lives with his father in a confusing and chaotic world. He is a fan of murder mystery and especially admires the hero of Conan Doyle’s classic stories: “I like Sherlock Holmes and I think that if I were a proper detective he is the kind of detective I would be” (p. 92). When Christopher finds his neighbour’s dog stabbed to death with a garden fork he stumbles into a real-life murder mystery complete with unexpected complications and a series of unanswered questions. Christopher writes the story of that mystery...

Martyn Pig is fourteen. Like Christopher he lives with his father in a confusing and chaotic world. Like Christopher, he too is a fan of detective fiction. In fact, he copes with his difficult life by immersing himself in the genre: “Murder mysteries, crime novels, whodunits, thrillers, detective stories, call them what you like, I love them” (p. 25). When Martyn accidentally kills his father he, like Christopher, finds himself inhabiting a real-life murder mystery. And he too writes his own story as a first person narrative in Kevin Brooks’ *Martyn Pig* (2002).

In the following discussion I want to draw out the similarities between the two narratives to demonstrate the ways in which fiction, and detective fiction in particular, provides a means for both Christopher and Martyn to make sense of their experience. Detective fiction, a literary genre that offers solutions as well as crimes, resolution as well as uncertainty, brings order to what both boys perceive to be the fundamentally disordered world around them. In their close identifications with the detective motif, and especially the detective hero, both Christopher and Martyn are able to draw from the power of stories to negotiate a path through their painful and uncertain adolescent experiences.

Richard Kearney has argued that the human condition is marked by a “search for narrative” as we seek “to introduce some kind of concord into the every day discord and dispersal we find about us” (p. 4). Christopher and Martyn experience more “discord and dispersal” than most. Both, in some respects, exist outside conventional social norms. Martyn has to endure a fraught domestic life that is dominated by his alcoholic and abusive father. Christopher has to cope with his experience of Asperger’s Syndrome (a form of autism that is not directly named by Haddon but is nevertheless clearly evident within the narrative).\(^1\)

But despite their seemingly atypical experiences, both Christopher and Martyn’s stories are in many ways also typical “rites of passage” novels, in which the adolescent hero (usually a boy) embarks upon a symbolic journey towards adulthood.\(^2\) A standard characteristic of this genre (ranging from L.P.Hartley’s classic *The Go-Between* to Michael Frayn’s more recent *Spies*) is that the teenage boy is not in full possession of his own story. The narrative is then nearly always one of isolation, misunderstanding, investigation. In order to understand his own narrative the teenage hero must piece together the clues that lie scattered around him and eventually develop a fuller and more mature
picture. Or, to put it another way, these are detective stories in which the teenage boy discovers who he is and who he might become. Christopher and Martyn's stories show that detective fiction can be about more than murdered dogs, dead parents and spiralling deception. They are stories about identity.

“It is a Puzzle”: Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

*The Curious Incident* and *Martyn Pig* are both concerned with metafictional issues of reading and writing detective fiction. In particular, both Christopher and Martyn show an interest in the detective persona (especially Sherlock Holmes and Inspector Morse) more than, say, the crime itself or the processes of police investigation. The detective figure in these texts is a kind of hero and one who provides a significant and meaningful point of identification for both teenage protagonists. This identification with the detective allows both Martyn and Christopher to construct their stories within the clearly defined parameters of genre fiction.

Peter Hühn has argued that the classic detective genre creates a contest between the criminal and the detective as they both struggle to possess meaning in the narrative. The criminal “writes” the crime and the detective must “read” the signs left behind (clues) correctly in order to solve the mystery and restore order. Christopher constructs his narrative with himself in the role of both detective and storyteller, interpreting or “reading” the traces of another’s crime or story. In the detective fiction mode he charts the trail of clues left by the criminal and in the course of his investigation finds out (indirectly) who killed Wellington, the murdered poodle at the centre of the mystery. But he also discovers that there is another story to be read. His own. By the end of his narrative he has found his voice as a writer as well as a reader of his own story.

Detective fiction offers Christopher a way to understand and to frame his own story because, as George Dove has argued, in a conventionalized literary form like detective fiction “there is a genuine correspondence between the rules of a game and the restraints upon the author's selection and handling of his or her narrative material” (p. 40). Christopher responds to this emphasis on structure. He lives by a meticulously detailed timetable that covers his every waking moment and activity. He likes the kind of systematized thinking represented by computer games, maths and detective stories. Whereas most novels make Christopher “feel shaky and scared...because they are lies about things which didn’t happen” (p. 24), detective fiction satisfies his desire for order. He explains that, “In a murder mystery
novel someone has to work out who the murderer is and then catch them. It is a puzzle. If it is a good puzzle you can sometimes work out the answer before the end of the book’’ (p. 15). In its classic form then (Christopher’s favourite) this highly stylized genre provides the reader with the stimulation of being presented with a riddle combined with the reassurance of knowing that there will always be a solution. In detective fiction, if not life, Christopher can understand the rules of a game.

Detective fiction thereby supports Christopher’s desire for a highly delineated existence. In writing his detective story he attempts to read and shape the apparent random nature of the world around him. Ambiguity of any kind upsets him. He orders his world by dividing days into good and black depending on the number of red cars or yellow cars he sees in a row (red are good, yellow are bad). When challenged about this by the school psychologist, Christopher answers:

I said I liked things to be in a nice order. And one way of being in a nice order was to be logical. Especially if those things were numbers or an argument. But there were other ways of putting things in a nice order. And that was why I had Good Days and Black Days. (p. 31)

He concludes that although his rigorous and seemingly eccentric rules about food, colours and tightly ordered routine appear illogical, “in life you have to take lots of decisions”’ and that options can be overwhelming without rules (however arbitrary) to eliminate the uncertainty of infinite choice (p. 106).

So rules that can be worked out are the logical solution to living in the midst of chaos and Christopher, like his hero Sherlock Holmes, privileges relentless logic over imprecise intuition:

Mr Jeavons said that I liked maths because it was safe. He said I liked maths because it meant solving problems, and these problems were difficult and interesting, but there was always a straightforward solution at the end. And what he meant was that maths wasn’t like life because in life there are no straightforward answers at the end. I know he meant this because this is what he said (p. 78).

But Christopher also understands that even in maths, intuition can get in the way of logic. He draws from the “Monty Hall” problem as an example of how logic can be used to provide the correct answer to a seemingly obvious maths problem. The solution to this problem is, as Christopher demonstrates at length, profoundly counterintuitive: “And this shows that intuition can sometimes get things wrong. And intuition is what people use in life to make decisions. But logic can help you work out the right answer’’ (p. 82). In this respect, his
identification with the ruthlessly logical Holmes both forms and validates Christopher’s sense of self. As Holmes declares in *The Sign of Four*, ‘I never guess. It is a shocking habit – destructive to the logical faculty’” (p. 14). In this way, Christopher, like Holmes, asserts the positive value of logic. What might have been perceived as a lack or limitation is thereby rewritten as an alternative and superior way of seeing the world.

I would argue that one of the reasons that *The Curious Incident* has enjoyed such popular and critical success is that Christopher’s Asperger’s Syndrome always positions him at a distance from that which appears obvious. This creates both comic moments (how to understand a raised eyebrow) and emotionally charged scenes (when Christopher rejects his father). Like the alien observer in Craig Raine’s poem “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home”, Christopher’s emotional dislocation means that he can describe the world around him with remarkable and sometimes startling perception. Both Christopher and the Martian make a different sense of the world, taking the seemingly random signs and clues presented by human life and shaping them into a new narrative. So Christopher can provide a surprisingly full picture of Mr Jeavons by describing the “approximately 60 tiny circular holes in each of his brown shoes” (p. 5), in the way that the Martian demonstrates an astute understanding of the human condition when it construes a bathroom as being “a punishment room”, a place of human suffering and isolation in which “everyone’s pain has a different smell”.

The ability to perceive with such apparently offbeat observation is what makes the classic detective hero so successful. As Hühn points out, “he is predominantly defined by his cold detachment from all human concerns, the clarity of his analytic intellect, and his interest in the truth-finding process for its own sake” (p. 460). He (and in its classic form the detective is nearly always a “he”) is usually an alien of one sort or another who observes the situation of the crime with a fresh vision. In identifying with Holmes, a supreme example of alien intelligence, Christopher finds a way of connecting his experience to a literary and cultural hero. Through Holmes, Christopher can see that he is not as his classmate’s brother calls him, “a spazzer” (p. 33). He is, like Holmes, in possession of exceptional abilities. As Holmes says to the prosaic Watson in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, “You see but you do not observe. The distinction is clear” (pp. 11–12). Christopher admires Holmes for exactly this quality:

‘He is very intelligent and he solves the mystery and he says

*The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.*

But he notices them, like I do (p. 92).’
However, Holmes' eccentricity, precision and detachment are pleasurable fictions. They provide a fantasy of identification for Christopher, but seeing the things that others do not observe is, in reality, exhausting and burdensome. He notices everything around him in hyper-detail; so, for example, not a field of cows, but “19 cows in the field, 15 of which are black and white and 4 of which are brown and white” (p. 175).

Haddon also allows the reader to see that Christopher’s reading and writing of his own story is only partial and the author shows the limits and often painful consequences of Christopher’s lack of intuitive connection, for him and those around him. When faced with new and frightening situations, Christopher’s mind goes into overload and his identification with the cool logic of Holmes becomes both more urgent and more poignant. In distress, he seeks a model in his hero: “And then I thought that I had to be like Sherlock Holmes and I had to detach my mind at will to a remarkable degree so that I did not notice how much it was hurting in my head.” (p. 164). These moments are important. They demonstrate how embedded the figure of Holmes is in Christopher’s consciousness. He needs this fictional character in order to make sense of his life and tell his story. But even this deeply embedded identification has its limits. The world is not just a series of puzzles to be solved by his prodigious powers of logic.

In writing his own detective story, Christopher encounters the muddled irresolution of life rather than the satisfying structures of art. As Jean Rhys has put it, “Art has a pattern. Life has none” (p. 10). When he expresses doubts about the validity of his story to his teacher, Siobhan, the exchange sums up the tension between form and formlessness that characterises the detective genre and Christopher’s everyday world:

I said that it wasn’t a proper book because it didn’t have a proper ending because I never found out who killed Wellington so the murderer was still At Large. And she said that was like life, and not all murders were solved and not all murderers were caught (p. 67).

Christopher does finally solve the mystery of who killed Wellington. As in Conan Doyle’s Silver Blaze the answer had to be that he was murdered by someone he knew. Holmes points out to the plodding police Inspector in the tale that the answer to the puzzle is in the overlooked detail:

“Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?”
“To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.”
“The dog did nothing in the night-time.”
“That was the curious incident,” remarked Sherlock Holmes (p. 28).
For Holmes the conclusion is logical: the dog didn’t bark so it follows that a stranger did not murder it.

Christopher, like Holmes, exercises his intellect to make sense of seemingly disordered events. He quotes from The Hound of the Baskervilles: “[Holmes’] mind...was busy in endeavouring to frame some scheme into which all these strange and apparently disconnected episodes could be fitted. And that is what I am trying to do by writing this book” (p. 92). He eventually discovers that his father stabbed the dog with a garden fork, that his mother is not as he has been told, dead, but living in London with their neighbour’s husband. But Christopher does not ever fully understand why. The complex emotions of his parents and the pain that they experience remain a mystery. Holmes solves a puzzle and achieves closure but Christopher’s (re)solution is an ongoing negotiation with the baffling business of life.

“Things don’t just Happen” Martyn in Martyn Pig

Christopher identifies with the enigmatic Holmes and aspires towards closure but Martyn Pig is a different type of detective. He too is a fan of Sherlock Holmes but he also identifies closely with the melancholy late-twentieth century detective, Inspector Morse, a detective who can be seen to combine the classic role of the intelligent outsider with the more self-doubting aspects of postmodern heroism. Martyn, unlike Christopher, is also drawn to the jagged realism that characterizes the twentieth-century American detective story. For Martyn, Chandler’s detective Marlowe is the quintessential hard-boiled private eye. He is:


Martyn shows a perfect understanding of the genre, and while he is often a hapless, helpless figure himself, he adopts many of Marlowe’s “cool, tough, bitter and funny” traits in his own narrative persona. And, in his summary of the hard-boiled form, he also anticipates, in practically all respects, the key elements of the story he is about to tell. Like Christopher, Martyn constructs himself as a murder mystery writer early on in the book. When Alex, the complicated older girl from down the road asks what he wants to be when he grows up, Martyn says ‘the first thing that came into my head. “I want to be a writer. I’m going to write a murder mystery”’ (p. 29).
The story of Martyn Pig takes place in a week leading up to Christmas and each chapter chronicles the events and thoughts of one day. It soon becomes clear that Martyn’s lot is to keep chaos, represented by his drunken father, at bay. As Martyn shapes his experience into a narrative (‘‘this - what I’m going to tell you about - it all happened just over a year ago’’ (p. 9)), he creates a sense of order from a confusing and disturbing chain of events. Martyn has a dual role in the narrative. He is both criminal and detective. Part of the story hinges on the way in which he covertly disposes of his father's body and becomes involved in a plan to make fraudulent financial gain from his father's death. So, as the criminal “writing” the crime, he has to disguise the clues and evade detection. In this respect he is successful. The crime he writes cannot be sufficiently decoded. The police find too many confusing threads and loose ends. But the story is not entirely in Martyn’s control. Other characters also generate strands of deception and he must, in the role of detective, read the clues they leave behind in order to fully make sense of his own story. So he is both writer and reader, trying not only to obscure his own crime but also to detect the responsibility of others in shaping his story. What makes Martyn different from Christopher is that he understands this duality and knows that his narrative is a strategy for coping with life’s ambivalence.

Detective fiction provides Martyn with a structure to shape his otherwise chaotic and depressing life. Like Christopher, he frames his story in metafictional terms by connecting it to the über-detective, Sherlock Holmes: ‘‘Things don’t just happen, they have reasons. And the reasons have reasons....Which is why, in a funny kind of way, it was The Complete Illustrated Sherlock Holmes that killed my dad’’ (p. 24). We see here a curious and engaging logic at play from the outset as Brooks suggests why Martyn, like Christopher, is predisposed towards the style and methods of detective fiction.

Although Martyn does not have Christopher’s Asperger’s Syndrome there are some telling similarities between the characters. Martyn’s aversion to the mess that symbolises his father’s disordered and destructive existence is resonant of Christopher’s obsessive desire for order: ‘‘I couldn’t stand it. All that jumble and dirt, it made me so I couldn’t think straight. I need to see clean surfaces, flat and uncluttered. I need to see the true shape of things’’ (p. 155). Martyn, like Christopher, feels the world around him to be a confusing, intense and potentially threatening place. The description of Martyn’s experience of Christmas shopping in the opening chapter suggests that Christopher’s extreme sensitivities to external stimuli are not only characteristic of autistic conditions. Perhaps one of the reasons that Christopher’s character is so affecting is that these responses resonate
with many people. When Martyn works his way through the crowds and finds himself staring into a pile of cheap toys in “The Bargain Bin”, he is overwhelmed by the “horrible tinny Christmas musak”. His feeling of discomfort and disorientation becomes unbearable:

A great swirling mess of sound searing its way into my head. I tried to ignore it, but it just seemed to get louder and louder. And it was hot in there, too. It was boiling. There was no air. I couldn’t breathe. The sound was paralysing – chattering machine guns, talking animals, wailing police car sirens, *dee-dur dee-dur* *dee-dur*, parents shouting at their kids, whacking them on the arm, the kids screaming and crying, the constant *beep beep beep* of the tills, the music. It was like something out of a nightmare.

I had to get out (p. 15).

The tone of this passage is strikingly similar to the episode in *The Curious Incident* when Christopher travels on the London Underground:

And then more people came into the little station and it became fuller and then the roaring began again and I closed my eyes and sweated and felt sick and felt the feeling like a balloon inside my chest and it was so big I found it hard to breathe (p. 217).

Both teenagers exist in a similarly isolated and sense-saturated condition. But perhaps what each invokes is the more general experience of adolescent (and indeed adult) isolation in the urban and suburban contexts of the twenty-first century. What is missing in both these descriptions of unremitting sensation is any sense of shaping narrative. Noises, sights, smells, feelings, are all experienced as random, jumbled and meaningless. Martyn and Christopher both realise the power of story to bring order and shape to this violently fragmented world.

Martyn describes how he first picked up *The Complete Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* when he was ill in bed, aged around ten, because “I got so bored...staring at the walls, listening to the sound of Dad clomping around in a drunken daze” (p. 25). It is from this moment that he develops his passion for the genre: “It was brilliant. I couldn’t put it down. I loved it...I was hooked” (p. 25). Sherlock Holmes has helped him to drown out the immediate clamour of his unruly father and, by the time that he kills his father, detective fiction is thoroughly embedded in Martyn’s consciousness. It indirectly precipitates the accident that leads to his father’s death and also gives Martyn a way in which to respond.

The fatal incident results from a seemingly mundane domestic irritation about television. Martyn explains that he had wanted to watch *Inspector Morse*, seeking a reassuring world of “twisting plots, red herrings, strange vicars, spooky murders and good old Morse always getting it
right in the end” (p. 34). But that evening he clashes with his father, whose constant interruptions eventually drive him to breaking point.

All I was trying to do was watch Inspector Morse on the television. Is that too much to ask? (p. 33).

He just wouldn’t stop. On and on and on. I couldn’t concentrate. I couldn’t hear what was going on. I was losing the plot (p. 34).

All I could hear was Dad’s crazy braying in my ear: “Lew-is! Lew-is! Lew-is! Lew-is! Lew-is! Lew-is!” [Morse’s sometimes pedestrian Sergeant]

“SHUT UP!” (p. 35).

Finally, Martyn can take no more. He loses the plot in every sense. He can’t hear Morse explaining the crucial key to the mystery. He pushes his father, who falls, hits his head and dies. So Martyn’s overarching narrative of events makes a kind of sense. If he had never been given *The Complete Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* for his birthday he would never have developed a love for murder mysteries, never have wanted to watch *Inspector Morse* in peace and never have accidentally killed his father.

But, as in *The Curious Incident*, the detective motif is more than just a narrative device. In times of stress Christopher, despite his general lack of empathy, thinks of Watson’s response to fear in Doyle’s fiction: “I saw father’s mobile phone...and I felt my skin...cold under my clothes like Doctor Watson in *The Sign of Four*” (p. 167). Similarly, Martyn absorbs a sense of Morse’s presence at a deep level. In fact, he sees his world through the lens of detective fiction in general and Morse in particular, noticing, for example, that “The sky was dull and silver-grey. The colour of Inspector Morse’s hair” (p. 56).

As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that Martyn can only cope with the horror of his situation by living his experience as if it were a fiction. He looks at his dead father’s body and scenes drawn from television drama inform his response:

An image suddenly flashes into my mind - one of those chalk outlines that detectives draw around the murder victim's body. It amused me, for some reason, and I let out a short strangled laugh (p. 39).

When he dreams that he is being interrogated in a stereotypical police interview room, complete with naked light bulb and twin cassette tapes whirring in the background, Martyn further constructs his experience as a slippage into fiction. Both Inspector Morse and Sherlock Holmes are interviewing him and the distinction between fantasy and reality becomes increasingly confused as Morse’s interrogation focuses on what Martyn was doing when his father died:

“Watching television.”

“Watching what?”
“Watching you!”
“Lew-isl!” (p. 47).

Like Christopher, who when he is held in a police cell wonders, “how I would escape if I was in a story” (p. 17), Martyn experiences events as if they are fictions. When Alex asks him how they will get his dead father’s body into the car he thinks: “It was a good question. The sort of question a good mystery writer ought to have an answer to. I didn’t have a clue” (p. 118). He can only think the problem through by wondering “how would it be done in a story?” (p. 118).

As Martyn attempts to understand his role in his own story, the structuring principles of detective fiction begin to overwhelm the narrative of his life and he struggles to re-define the boundaries between fiction and life. He discovers that Alex has betrayed him. She has murdered her boyfriend, the unattractive blackmailer Dean, and double-crossed Martyn. Martyn realises that his dependence on detective fiction has failed to prepare him for this uncomfortable reality:

No I thought. It’s not real. Severed brake lines. Not in real life. That’s the kind of thing that only happens in books (p. 186).
I should have known. I would have known if it was a story, a murder mystery, I would have spotted the clues (p. 189).

Finally Martyn understands that his life cannot be fully absorbed into the generic structures of classic detective fiction. As in Christopher’s story, the mystery is solved but uncertainty remains.

It’s never so complicated in books. Well, it is, but in different ways. Complications in stories are simple complications. Clues, plots, twists and turns. Complicated but solvable. But these complications, real complications, these were all blurred together, all mixed up (p. 199).

When Martyn is actually in a police interview room being interrogated about his father’s death, it is nothing like his dream. Instead it’s “just a room, an ordinary-looking office room” (p. 200).

At the end of the book he is living with his Aunty Jean (a maudlin drunk) in a semi-detached house on the better side of town. He has evaded police enquiries into his role in his father’s death. He has had his first experiences of death, romantic desire and betrayal. And he still reads detective fiction. When Aunty Jean encourages him “to get a decent hobby.... You can’t spend all day lying on your bed reading detective books”, he wonders, “Why not?” (p. 212). But he has become a knowing reader. He knows that stories can hold power as well as pleasure. Like Christopher, Martyn is now a writer as well as a reader of detective fiction. He recognises that in telling his own story
he can also change it. When, in the epilogue, Martyn receives a letter from Alex urging him to “hurry up and write that murder mystery...I’m sure you can think up a story” (p. 220), the reader knows, of course, that he already has.

Christopher’s story ends with his optimistic assessment of his own future. His father has bought him a dog. He has passed his Maths A level, he is preparing to take A level Further Maths and Physics. He plans to go to university and to get a first class honours degree. He is confident about his future because he has constructed his identity in a narrative:

And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? And I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything (p. 268).

Whereas Martyn, with characteristic poststructuralist scepticism, realises that there are still loose ends and uncertainties in his narrative, Christopher presents a far more positive view. Here perhaps is the key difference between the two narratives. Christopher is drawn to the nineteenth-century classic detective genre characterised by Holmes. Martyn inhabits the twenty-first century world of relativism and doubt: a world in which detectives and readers always question notions of truth and reality.

As Linda Williams has put it, “we are all born into stories” (p. 1). In one way this means that we enter a world with pre-existing language, relationships, ideologies, codes. We enter a story that is already running. But, in another way, we are born into stories because this is how we make sense of ourselves. We are always, to an extent, narrativizing ourselves in an effort to construct our identities. In the characters of Christopher and Martyn, Mark Haddon and Kevin Brooks present two memorable illustrations of the complex relationship between narrative and identity. In telling their stories Christopher and Martyn find out more about who they are and the world that they inhabit. But these are not just coming-of-age stories. They remind their readers that we all read and write our own stories as we try to make sense of our infinitely muddled lives.

Notes

2. Bill Greenwell makes the point that *The Curious Incident* can also be read as a suburban comedy”, a “comic rite of passage in the same vein as Sue Townsend’s *Adrian Mole, aged 13 3/4:*” (p. 282).

**References**


