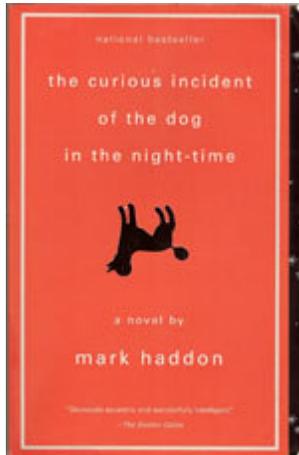


Readin' & Writin' With Lauraine- September 2006



I would not have read *the curious incident of the dog in the night-time* by Mark Haddon if it had not been chosen for The Bookies (my discussion group) to read. I had seen it in bookstores, read about it in lists, and yet nothing compelled me to pick it up—even though it sounded like it might be about a dog. I love dogs, read most of the dog stories I come across. So once again, I have to thank my discussion group for getting me into a very good novel.

I would like to say that the story grabbed me on the first page, but I'd rather not lie. Not even three pages into it (but after starting a second or third time) the first person narrator began to intrigue me. He says, "my name is Christopher John Francis Boone" and there are drawings on those pages. As I learn that Christopher is autistic, I realize why I've been uncomfortable with the story. It's different. So I read on and pretty soon I'm flipping pages as fast as I can, wondering how this boy with his own peculiar set of difficulties is going to make it through the book. I compare it to *The Rain Man*, which is one of my all time favorite movies, for this character has many of the same needs as Dustin Hoffman's character, an obsessive need for order, for patterns, and like all of us, struggling to understand our world. Christopher decides to find out who killed the dog that you learn of on page one. His father asks him to drop it, but once this character focuses on something, he cannot let it go. And when he tries to, circumstances push him back into the investigation.

By the end of the story I have immense respect for both the character and the author who created him.

When I finished reading *the curious incident...*and yes, the title is not capitalized, I was surprised to learn that a young man wrote the book. So my question: how did he learn so much about a person with autism that he could write from that character's point of view and make it so believable? I've talked about research before, but usually in reference to events or places or eras, realizing that most people are fairly normal or what we call normal and as you learn and observe, you can expect them to probably act within certain ways. Not so with Christopher. And since autistic people really don't like to answer questions, interviews would not be a strong possibility. So back to the research—reading journals, studies, observing autistic people and then talking with family members, friends or care-givers and professional and medical resources would be my guess.

The bottom line: if you are a writer and you have a good idea for a story, you will do whatever is necessary to get the information you need. Some research takes far more time than you planned, and some just falls into your lap because you ask everyone you know if they know anything about your subject or if they know anyone who knows anything about your subject. My friend Liz Curtis Higgs has made many trips to Scotland and has studied hundreds of books in order to write her series set in the middle ages. Another friend learned to speak old Dutch so she could read the original manuscripts, rather than depending on a translator. I know of a man who went through police academy training so he could become a prison guard so he could write the book he dreamed of.

We writers are a crazy sort, but we all have to hit a point where we stop the research and start writing the story. I have finally learned to leave holes in my manuscript when I realize I need more information on a certain fact or scene and keep writing so that I'm not hung up again on that research hook. I will go back and fill it in later. It's okay. There is no law that says I need to know everything up front. Or, I'm afraid I would never finish a book.

By the way, my new novel, *A Promise for Ellie*, is now in the stores. Return with me to the Bjorklunds in Blessing, North Dakota and see what happens next.

Until next month,

Happy readin' & writin' from Lauraine