LIANE HANSEN, host:

During one of his adventures, Sherlock Holmes turns to the gentleman who has brought him into a case about a missing horse. The key to solving the crime is the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime. Author Mark Haddon thought that would be a perfect title for his novel about a teen-ager obsessed with Sherlock Holmes and the murder of a neighbor's poodle. Martha Woodroof from member station WMRA has more.

MARTHA WOODROOF reporting: Four red cars parked in a row means it will be a very good day, but anything yellow--bananas, cars, stripes in the road--is bad. Fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone organizes his life around a set of rules that to most of us don't make much sense, and when he finds Wellington impaled with a garden fork, Christopher isn't horrified, he's intrigued. Author Mark Haddon reads the opening.

Mr. MARK HADDON (Author, "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time"): (Reading) It was seven minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears' house, its eyes were closed. It looked as if it was running on its side the way dogs run when they think they are chasing a cat in a dream. But the dog was not running or asleep. The dog was dead. There was a garden fork sticking out of the dog. The points of the fork must have gone all the way through the dog and into the ground because the fork had not fallen over. I decided that the dog was probably killed with the fork because I could not see any other wounds in the dog, and I do not think that you would stick a garden fork into a dog after it had died for some other reason, like cancer for example or a road accident. But I could not be certain about this.

WOODROOF: Although his problem is never actually named, Christopher is coping with Asperger's syndrome, a kind of mild autism with a startling streak of genius. Christopher is a math whiz and a literalist. He can't lie or tell a joke, and most other people leave him baffled. Mark Haddon says he didn't plan to create such a hero. Christopher just showed up.

Mr. HADDON: I started three different novels at the same time, just writing the first few pages, and I wanted something that was gripping and that would make you wonder what was going to happen next, which is how I came up with this image of the dog lying dead on the lawn with a garden fork through it. And, you know, it was gripping and it was vivid. And with apologies to any dog lovers listening, I actually thought it was really quite funny. But it was only funny if you described it in this very flat, neutral, toneless voice. And I loved the voice. I started using it, and only about three or four pages later did I start to ask myself, `Who did it belong to?'

WOODROOF: Christopher's fixated pursuit of the dog's murderer creates a wake of confusion. He's Chaplinesque in a way--funny, sad and poignant all at the same time. Haddon found that writing in the boy's voice brought other, unexpected benefits.

Mr. HADDON: He doesn't get sentimental. He doesn't explain things too much. He just paints a picture and leaves lots of space. And perhaps most importantly it's the voice of a person who's not aware of there being a reader out there. So when you're writing in that voice, you never try and persuade the reader to feel this or that about something. And once I realized that, I knew that the voice was gold dust.

WOODROOF: Haddon says no doubt his post-university experience working among people with emotional and mental challenges helped shape that voice. However, Christopher's various tics, obsessions and difficulties are gathered from people Haddon says would never be labeled disabled.

Mr. HADDON: The math, his mind, his obsession with colors and with food. They come from people I know. But even the extreme things he does--for example, when he's under huge stress, you know, he buries his head in the corner of the room and groans, as he calls it. But almost every (unintelligible) I know at some point in their life when they experience great stress is, you know, you have to go into the bathroom and you have to lie on the floor and bang your forehead on the side of the bath or something ridiculous like that. So Christopher's made up--he's a patchwork of, as it were, "normal," unquote, people. And only when you put those bits together do you get a person that people think has a disability.

WOODROOF: Mark Haddon doesn't label Christopher's oddities for another reason. He doesn't want to limit our relationship with him, make Christopher seem somehow less than fully human. Psychiatrist and writer Oliver Sacks, who wrote a laudatory blurb for the novel, thinks Haddon's fiction models the way the real world should be and used to be before we went diagnosis crazy. Dr. Sacks points to the old age of poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Dr. OLIVER SACHS (Psychiatrist): We would now say that he got Alzheimer's disease. But neither he nor anyone around him regarded his failing as a disease or a stigma, and indeed when he was asked how he was, he would smile and he'd say, `I have lost all my intellectual faculties, but I feel perfectly well, thank you.' And the notion that one could lose one's faculties and yet be perfectly well and a full person, you know, I think has somewhat disappeared.

Mr. HADDON: For me, the book is at a very deep level about coming to terms with limits. WOODROOF: Again, author Mark Haddon.

Mr. HADDON: I mean, Christopher leads what seems at first sight this dreadfully, dreadfully constricted life, both, you know, emotionally and physically in terms of his family and in terms of what he does day to day. And yet hopefully if you spend enough time in his head, you realize, you know, it's as big a world as anyone's world, and it's, you know, potentially infinite. WOODROOF: As to why "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" is showing up on best-seller lists in this country, it's something Mark Haddon understands...

Mr. HADDON: With huge difficulty. I mean, I think it's wonderful. But, you know, there's no sex, there's no car chases, you know, there's no courtroom climaxes. There's a dead dog and a journey on the underground train to London. WOODROOF: It may have something to do with those four red cars. Christopher, with all his peculiar rules, manages to show the rest of us just how peculiar our own rules can be. For NPR News, I'm Martha Woodroof. HANSEN: This is WEEKEND EDITION from NPR News. I'm Liane Hansen. Word count: 1188 (Copyright 2003)