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Altogether Now: One Book, One New Paltz

By Pauline Uchmanowicz | Photo Collage by Jennifer May



All over New Paltz, people are reading the curious incident of the dog in the night-time as part of the "One Book" project.

"It was seven minutes after midnight. The dog was lying in the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shear's 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."

So begins Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Vintage, 2003), a story narrated by Christopher Boone, a fictional 15-year-old mathematical genius with Asperger's syndrome (a form of autism), who lives outside of London and admires Sherlock Holmes. Who committed canine homicide and why? All over New Paltz, readers want to know.

The town has adopted this offbeat murder mystery as the centerpiece of "One Book," a community-wide reading celebration with scheduled events unfolding this month (November 1-7) in various locations around the village. According to project coordinator Rachel Rigolino, "One cannot imagine a better choice for a town as singular as the narrator of Haddon's book."


Christopher's tale, which he was assigned to write by a school counselor as a type of therapy, ironically yet poignantly examines human universals (e.g., love, family ties, survival, and fear). The resulting novel experiments with literary perspective, ingeniously blending genres and including letters, pictorial diagrams, and logic. Chapters count up in prime numbers (as opposed to a cardinal sequence) to reflect the narrator's fascination with mathematics; ditto for the appendix, which contains a math proof.

"It's such a weird, funny, quirky, cool, neat little bestseller—just like New Paltz," offers Celeste Cleary, the publicity coordinator. One Book programs, inaugurated by Washington Center for the Book in 1998, aim to encourage a broad spectrum of people in a single school, town, city, or region to read the same book and to participate in programs and discussions about it during a specified period. (Such reading promotions have since taken place in all 50 states as well as in communities worldwide.) But in the artsy college town of New Paltz (recently voted second on a list of "50 Best Small Towns in America" by *Men's Journal*), where traditional and progressive politics meet across a fault line, One Book's only certain outcome is unpredictability.

Several town denizens simultaneously shared the idea of launching One Book locally. Cleary, a graphic designer and small-press publisher responsible for creating the project's poster and website, carried the concept back east from her hometown of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where she had created the logos for a similar program. This past spring, while attending a regional planning function, she talked it up with like-minded people. Gerald Benjamin, chair of One Book, One New Paltz, was among them.

Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Professor of Political Science at SUNY New Paltz, Benjamin first learned of One Book initiatives from a novelist at a dinner party. "Some town in Ohio had adopted her book, and when she described giving a talk there and the community consequences of reading the same book, I thought it was a spectacular idea," he recalls. "Like most college towns, New Paltz focuses too often on divisive town-gown issues like beer and taxes. I thought rather than just talk about them, we should do something together, and that it be an intellectual endeavor, because we have a very literate town. The fundamental question became: How do you create or enhance community to get people talking to each other intellectually?"

A onetime elected member of the Ulster County legislature who served between 1981 and 1993, Benjamin claims "deep feelings" about the region, as well as dismay that "something is missing" from our public discourse. For him, One Book seems related to the precepts of modern-day communitarianism, a political



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"Best or worst lie I've ever told: 'Convincing someone I had never met before that I was a street merchant from Kiev.'"

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philosophy whose adherents assume that the principal task of government is to secure and fairly distribute liberties and economic resources to individuals. "In creating a common experience for all who live, work, and study in New Paltz—reading one book, discussing it, and considering its broader implications—One Book intends for our citizenry to think, communicate, and act together, creating a stronger community in the process," he suggests.

To launch the local reading initiative, volunteers from the college and larger New Paltz community, including members of local government, libraries, schools, and the press, convened in Benjamin's office on a biweekly basis over the course of half a year. The committee collectively selected The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, convinced by New Paltz High School English teacher Michelle Diana of its suitability for readers of broad ages and interests. According to Benjamin, "The book has a rationale for everyone. You can discuss it with a mathematician, a sociologist, a psychologist, or a writer." To pique participation in One Book, the first few chapters of Haddon's novel were excerpted last month in the New Paltz Times, and "house" copies placed in village hangouts, including the Bakery, Village Tea Room, Mudd Puddle Cafe, Bacchus, Suds Laundromat, Art in Soul III Tattoo & Piercing, and Convenient Deli.

Under the direction of coordinator Rigolino, an English professor at SUNY New Paltz and recent first-place recipient of the annual Poughkeepsie Journal Prize in Fiction, project organizers also scheduled programs that target readers who want to enrich their experience of reading Haddon's novel, or to meet others inclined to discuss the work. Events include a number of public discussions, such as those led by Martha Afzal, professor emeritus at Dutchess Community College (at the Bakery) and Nancy DeNicolo, school psychologist (at Unison Arts Center). Bill Connors of the Mohonk Mountain Players will give a public reading from The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time at Ariel Booksellers. As sponsors of a One Book Creative Writing Contest, Chronogram will publish winning entries in its February 2006 issue.

Programs scheduled on the SUNY New Paltz campus include conversations in the dorms, a workshop designed and led by Education graduate students at the Teaching and Learning Center, and "Understanding Autism: A Panel Discussion," chaired by Dr. Jane Nofer Poskanzer and featuring keynote speaker Michael John Carley, executive director of GRASP (Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership), at Lecture Center 100. Also in LC 100, Lou Lewis of the Baker Street Irregulars will lead a discussion following a screening of the film Young Sherlock Holmes. Meanwhile, select high school and college classes (such as one I teach, Graphic Literature) are reading Haddon's bestseller this semester.

Among her expectations for One Book, Rigolino cites the value that reading en masse potentially holds for all area residents. She adds, "But another hope I have is that people are brought together to discuss some of the book's larger themes, such as the idea of "otherness." Because of his autism (unnamed in the book), Christopher is isolated, not only from his community, but also from his own family. There are times in the narrative when he finds himself completely alone and, at these moments, Haddon manages to make his reader feel the terror of such isolation—but not in a heavy-handed way. In fact, the book is often humorous.

Rigolino also believes that the discussion of Asperger's syndrome, which takes place Thursday, November 3 at 7pm, "promises to be the highlight of the week." Along with keynote speaker Carley, panelists include Jamey Wolff, director of the Children's Annex in Kingston; Valerie Paradiz, author of the memoir Elijah's Cup: A Family's Journey into the Community and Culture of High-Functioning Autism and Asperger's Syndrome; and local poet Brian Liston, who himself has autism. "Their collective level of expertise will bring yet another dimension to our community-wide reading project," according to the coordinator.

Best known in his native England as a children's author before The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time became an overnight international sensation and won a slew of literary prizes, Haddon has some past experience working with autistic people, though admittedly he did little formal research when creating Christopher's character. But, curiously echoing his idiosyncratic narrator's chief trait, lately the author has been shunning the limelight. Before he stopped granting interviews, Haddon told Dave Weich of Powell's Books that he didn't set out to write a novel about an autistic boy. When such a voice came to him, a more difficult puzzle presented itself. "I wanted the whole book to be in Christopher's voice, but the paradox is that if Christopher were real he would find it very hard, if not impossible, to write a book," he said. Some critics consequently have faulted the portrayal of the boy's condition, but those who know well someone with Asperger's may find it spot-on (as I did).

Haddon meanwhile revels in slightly eccentric reactions to the novel, such as that of a reader who, altogether missing its Asperger's angle, told him, "Oh, I didn't realize there was actually anything wrong with Christopher."

One Book, One New Paltz committee member Cleary favors that remark. "You don't really know what's going on with anyone at any given time—they're in their own world in their own head and may have trouble communicating," she says. "I think One Book is a wonderful entree into getting to know people in alternate ways, to talk about things in ways other than in a typical transaction."

Or, as Haddon told the London Observer last year, "Reading is a conversation. All books talk. But a good book listens as well." For more information about the community-wide celebration of The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,

