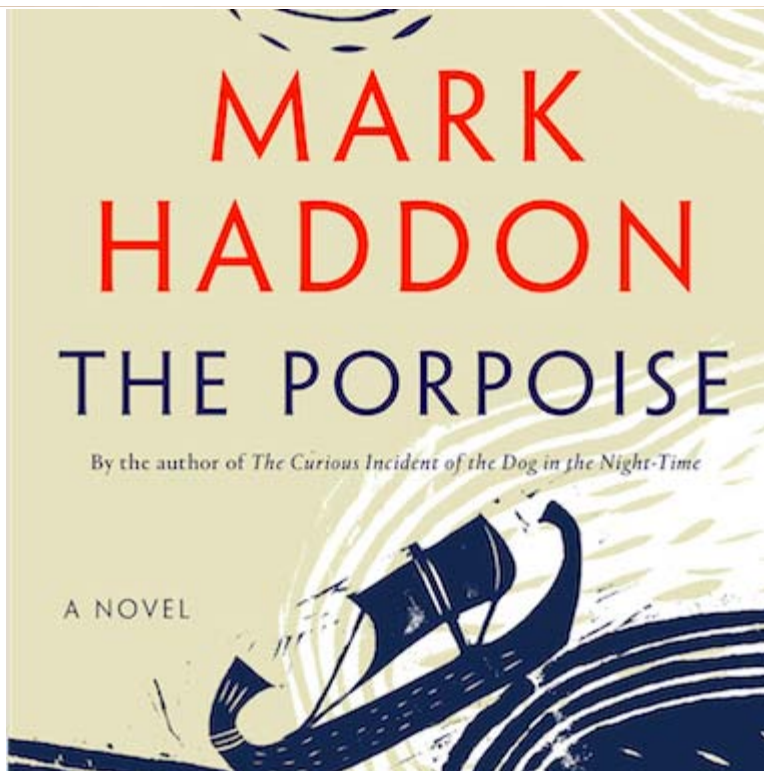


Tuesday, June 18, 2019

Book & Film
GLOBE





FICTION

A Porpoise-Driven Life

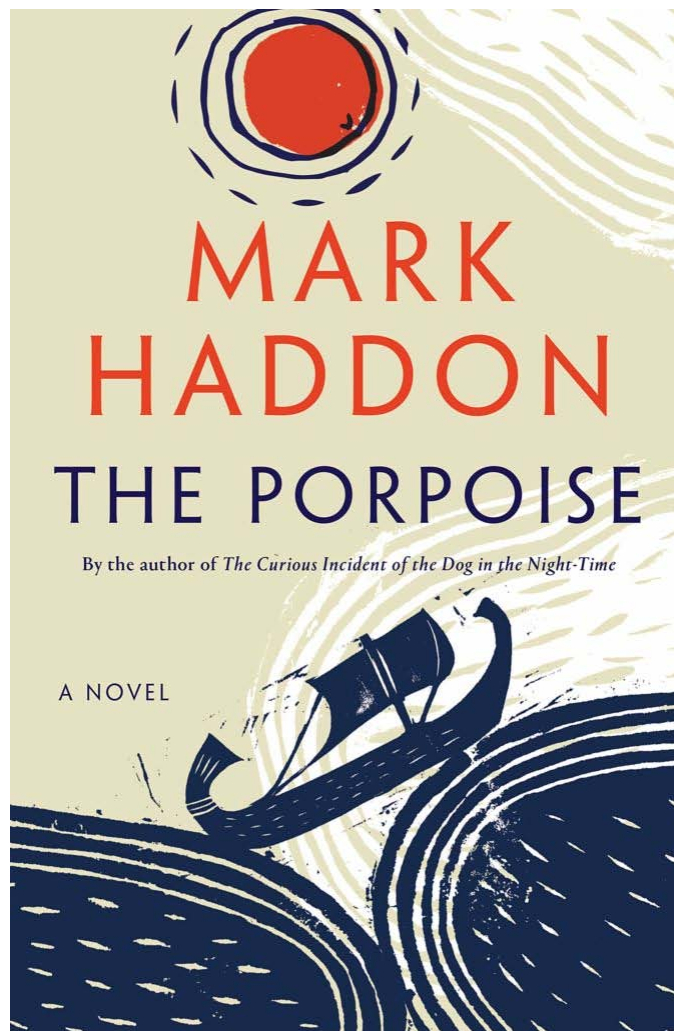
Mark Haddon's New Novel Plays With Narrative, to Narrative's Detriment

June 17, 2019 Michael Giltz

In author Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Night-Time*, he found inspiration from an unreliable narrator. In that case, it was a teenager living with Asperger's Syndrome. Through that character's eyes, an unremarkable event became a mystery and the people around him became equally puzzling. The novel proved a blockbuster, albeit overly praised. Once you figured out the perspective of our narrator, once you "got him," the story lost interest. I found the hit stage adaptation more satisfying.

Before that breakout, Haddon was a modestly successful writer of children's books who dipped a toe into television. After, he branched out into all sorts of areas. He tackled Down's Syndrome in a radio play and TV movie, he wrote an adult novel revolving around mental health, he delivered short stories (some highly acclaimed), and even wrote poetry. Despite some good reviews here and there, it's fair to say *Curious Incident* was looking unrepeatable.

Porpoisefully Retelling the Myth



Not anymore. *The Porpoise* plays with an ancient myth that inspired the play *Pericles, Prince Of Tyre* by William Shakespeare (and George Wilkins, or so the scholars say). It's one of those legends that proves more horrifying the more you actually pay attention. In it, a King's wife dies in childbirth, and he becomes obsessed with the daughter that survived.

The King wants her exclusively for himself but can't say so aloud. So he welcomes suitors once she comes of age. But if they can't solve the King's riddle, he immediately executes them. One suitor realizes the King's unnatural desires, but of course can't voice the truth, so he delays and then flees for his life. Most retellings follow this bold adventurer as he dodges King-sent assassins, falls in love with another woman, and so on.

Haddon read this story and thought, hey, what about the women? His retelling doesn't see the King's daughter as a plot device but as a full-blooded person trapped in an almost unimaginable horror. Haddon does the same for the woman our "hero" falls for, finding her journey just as exciting as the man's.

So *The Porpoise* is ready for the #MeToo era. But is it good? Not quite. Haddon needed something else to complicate the telling. Instead of a uniquely unreliable protagonist, he devised a narrative structure that darts back and forth through time.

The Porpoise begins with a strand set in the modern era. The King is now a wealthy billionaire, and his Queen a world-famous movie star. When she dies in a plane crash but their unborn child survives, the billionaire keeps the girl cloistered away from the tabloid media and prying eyes. Haddon is quite good at showing the father's love slippery-sloping into obsession and then rape.

Come Sail Away

Just as a "suitor" appears and bodyguards chase him off, the story jumps to ancient times, where the suitor is on a ship fleeing a mad King, desperate for safe harbor. This strand is clean and uncomplicated in the telling as the suitor's next love interest takes center stage. Her adventures include an accidental burial at sea, and she later survives and flourishes in a small town as a priestess. Meanwhile, their daughter grows up in a royal household and finds herself targeted by a mad Queen jealous of the girl being more popular than her own child.

And then the narrative jumps again, this time to Shakespeare's era. The Bard's likely collaborator on Pericles, Prince of Tyre was a vile innkeeper and pimp who once beat a pregnant woman. Here, that man, George Wilkins, is dying, surrounded by servants and hangers-on who clearly don't give a toss for the bastard. The ghost of Shakespeare appears and leads Wilkins towards his destiny in the afterlife, an uneasy prospect at best for such a man.

Haddon is essentially retelling the tale two (or three) times and that allows him to offer up multiple endings that are variously righteous, sad, and happy. While he handles the narrative structure capably, it gets in the way of a simpler, better book.

The modern setting, which focuses on the King and his imprisoned, abused daughter is fine but never quite catches the imagination. Every time we left it, I was disappointed, not because it was so good but because I'd been holding out hope it would soon come alive.

The relatively brief passages set in Shakespeare's time are both the best-written and the least necessary. Standing on its own, this section would make a fine short story but it serves no purpose here.

But Haddon sets the bulk of *The Porpoise* in the classical era. These sections boast a clean, uncomplicated voice. He delivers the story from a modern perspective, giving the women their due, without lapsing into undue moralizing. It doesn't rise to the heights of Madeline Miller's *Circe* or *The Song Of Achilles*, but, on its own, it wouldn't have been too far off either.

Haddon will probably enjoy his biggest hit in years with *The Porpoise*. But if he gets out of his own way and trusts his writing to stand on its own without any narrative games, he might just break the surface of the sea



Author Mark Haddon

more often and with more grace.

(Doubleday, June 18, 2019)

Tags: Mark Haddon, The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time, The Porpoise

← The French New Wave at 60

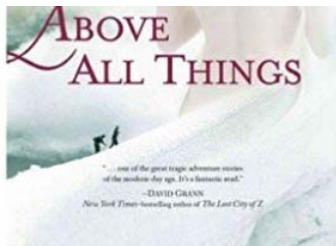
Drug Dorks of Germany →



Michael Giltz

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

You May Also Like



High In the Air (An Everest Novel)

February 13, 2013



A Good Book by a Good Guy

January 6, 2015



The Apex of My

Audiobook Addiction

December 4, 2013

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment

Name *

Email *

Website



Subscribe to our mailing list

Social

Twitter

Facebook

Recent Posts

Tales of the Kinda Shitty

Drug Dorks of Germany

A Porpoise-Driven Life

The French New Wave at 60

Men In Blech

Recent Comments

Ken Kurson **on** Tales of the Kinda Shitty

Morgan Thomas **on** Is Molly Ringwald a Good Translator?

Neal Pollack **on** The Plot Against Having Sex With Old Philip Roth

Lesje Drinn **on** The Plot Against Having Sex With Old Philip Roth

Whatever, Black Mirror, Technology is Awesome! – Book and Film Globe – sky news hub **on** ‘Avengers: Endgame’

Archives

[June 2019](#)

[May 2019](#)

[April 2019](#)

[March 2019](#)

[February 2019](#)

[January 2019](#)

[December 2018](#)

[November 2018](#)

[October 2018](#)

[September 2018](#)

[August 2018](#)

[July 2018](#)

[May 2017](#)

[February 2016](#)

[May 2015](#)

[February 2015](#)

[January 2015](#)

[December 2014](#)

[November 2014](#)

[March 2014](#)

[December 2013](#)

[September 2013](#)

[April 2013](#)

[February 2013](#)

January 2013
December 2012
July 2012
November 2011
September 2011
June 2011
May 2011
March 2011
May 2001
March 2001
October 2000
August 2000
July 2000
June 2000
February 2000
January 2000
December 1999
November 1999
October 1999
September 1999
August 1999
July 1999
June 1999
May 1999
April 1999
March 1999
February 1999
September 1998
June 1998
May 1998
April 1998

February 1998
October 1997
September 1997
August 1997
June 1997
May 1997
April 1997
March 1997
February 1997
January 1997
November 1996
September 1996
August 1996
June 1996
May 1996
April 1996
February 1996
January 1996
October 1995
August 1995
February 1995
January 1995

Editor: Neal Pollack | General Manager, Advertising: Kevin Sanders – 201-724-0340

Sea of Reeds
MEDIA

Book and Film Globe California Globe Fine Art Globe Modern Consensus New Jersey Globe
Rock and Roll Globe

[About Us](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertise with us](#) |

© 2019 Book and Film Globe