

Mark Haddon

BY JESSICA TEISCH

English polymath Mark Haddon—poet, novelist, illustrator, cartoonist, and abstract painter—has never written the same book twice. His newest novel, *The Porpoise* (reviewed on page 22), might be his most provocative work yet—a modern-day tale of rape morphs into a surreal, strange retelling of Shakespeare’s *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. The transfixing, labyrinthine narrative wends its way through Elizabethan England, classical mythology, and the present-day, as it gives voice and agency to women throughout history.

The Porpoise marks somewhat of a departure for Haddon, whose other adult novels are, in some sense, family dramas. Haddon wrote the best-selling, multi-award-winning novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), from the perspective of an autistic boy searching for a neighbor’s dog’s killer; *A Spot of Boother* (2006) explores one family’s severe dysfunction. Yet Haddon crafts *The Porpoise* with the adventure, the dark humor, and the daydreamy wonder and vision that characterize much of his work.

Haddon was not always a writer. Born in 1962 in Northampton, England, he completed his literature degree at Oxford and his master’s in English Literature at Edinburgh University. He then worked in Scotland, caring for people with various disabilities, which provided fodder for his later writing. He moved to Boston for a year with his wife; when they returned to England, he took up abstract painting and sold his art. He then started illustrating magazines and children’s books and writing for popular children’s television shows. He published his first children’s book, *Gilbert’s Gobstopper*, in 1987, followed by others, including the popular Agent Z Series and the Dino Days Series. Throughout the 1990s, Haddon was known as a children’s author. Then came his crossover, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*—a best seller that was translated into more than a dozen languages and adapted into an award-winning play—and suddenly Haddon became a household name.

Here we survey his adult fiction, select books for younger readers, and his new novel.

HADDON’S ADULT FICTION

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2002)

♦ WHITBREAD AWARD, GUARDIAN AWARD, COMMONWEALTH WRITERS’ PRIZE

Haddon’s first adult novel, though it was also marketed toward young adults, is a whodunnit, a coming-of-age story, a postmodern romp, and novel of manners, of sorts. A global best seller, it was published at the height of the Harry Potter craze, which blurred the line between adult and children’s fiction. Narrated by a deadpan teen with Asperger’s, a character in part inspired by Haddon’s work with disabled people in the early 1980s, the novel continually disorients the reader, as it reflects the mind of its narrator. As Haddon told Penguin, “As it happens, when I was putting Christopher together I drew upon a long list of beliefs, habits, quirks and behaviours which I borrowed from friends and acquaintances and members of my own family. ... Suffice to say that neither of them would be labelled as having a disability. Which is only to say that Christopher is not that different from the rest of us. It’s the number and combination of his eccentricities which cause him difficulties.”

Fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone of Swindon, England—who describes himself as “someone who has Behavioural Problems”—solves complex math problems for fun, despises the color yellow, and cannot comprehend human emotions. Late one night, he stumbles across the body of his neighbor’s poodle, Wellington, skewered on a pitchfork, and he is mistakenly accused of murder. After spending the night in jail, Christopher is determined to emulate his favorite character, Sherlock Holmes, and to uncover the real



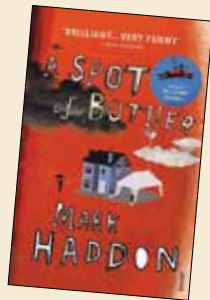
criminal, while recording his investigation in a notebook. Written in Christopher's succinct and guileless voice, the resulting manuscript, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, sheds as much light on the thought patterns and behaviors of a young autistic man as it does on the central mystery and the secrets of his parents, their marriage, and their neighbors. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2003)

"The imaginative leap of writing a novel—the genre that began as an exercise in sentiment—without overt emotion is a daring one, and Haddon pulls it off beautifully," wrote the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "Christopher's story is full of paradoxes: naive yet knowing, detached but poignant, often wryly funny despite his absolute humorlessness."

A Spot of Bother (2006)

On the surface, Haddon turned to more domestic, conventional matters in his second adult novel. "Where else could I go? *Curious Incident* was a very odd book," he told *New York* magazine. "... If I got stranger still, I'd probably be off the map. But there's a quieter oddness about this book which isn't obvious." Though about the messy ordinariness of life—marriage and divorce, birth and death—it features the highly anxious protagonist George Hall, who observes, "The human mind was not designed for sunbathing and light novels."

While trying on trousers, aging patriarch George Hall discovers a large, purple lesion on his hip. He immediately assumes the spot to be cancer and himself to be doomed. As he struggles with existential angst, the troubles pile on: his daughter, Katie, wants to marry a laborer whom she's not sure she loves; his son won't admit to being gay (though everyone knows he is); and his wife is having an affair with one of his former colleagues. Despite their individual difficulties, everyone attempts to pull together and become a family once again, ready to face Katie's impending wedding with as much humor as dread. "If *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, with its equations, charts and diagrams, revels in pushing the ways in which a novel's boundaries can stretch, then *A Spot of Bother's* charm lies in the generosity in which it fills a novel's traditional boundaries, both in terms of form and subject matter," concluded *Pop Matters*. (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2006)

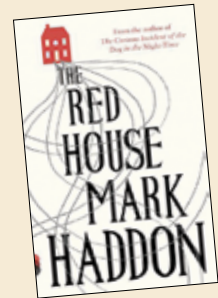


The Red House (2012)

Haddon portrays his characters in his third novel with great sympathy and honesty. What makes *The Red House* unusual is his decision to narrate it from all eight characters' per-

spectives, which often shift from paragraph to paragraph. This kaleidoscopic technique generally pays off, as it gives impressionistic insight into the complex, rich interior lives of the characters—from teenagers to those experiencing midlife crises. "The action is subtle and often interior, and what really counts is not what happens so much as the sharp observations of how people behave and feel, and the gap between the two," wrote the *Guardian*.

Richard is a wealthy Edinburgh radiologist with a brand-new second wife and a sullen stepdaughter. His estranged sister, Angela, is a busy school teacher with three children and a husband neck deep in a tumultuous office affair. After their mother's death, the two 40-something siblings and their families gather for a one-week holiday in a farmhouse in a sleepy town near the Welsh border in an attempt to rekindle their relationships. But, under the strain of a forced vacation, each family member—each stranger—must deal with his or her grief; resentments, old and new; and deceptions that threaten to tear this messy, dysfunctional family even further apart, even as they hope to repair past grievances. (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2012)

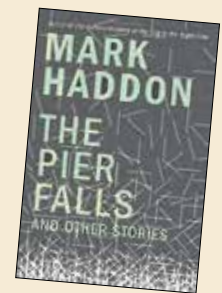


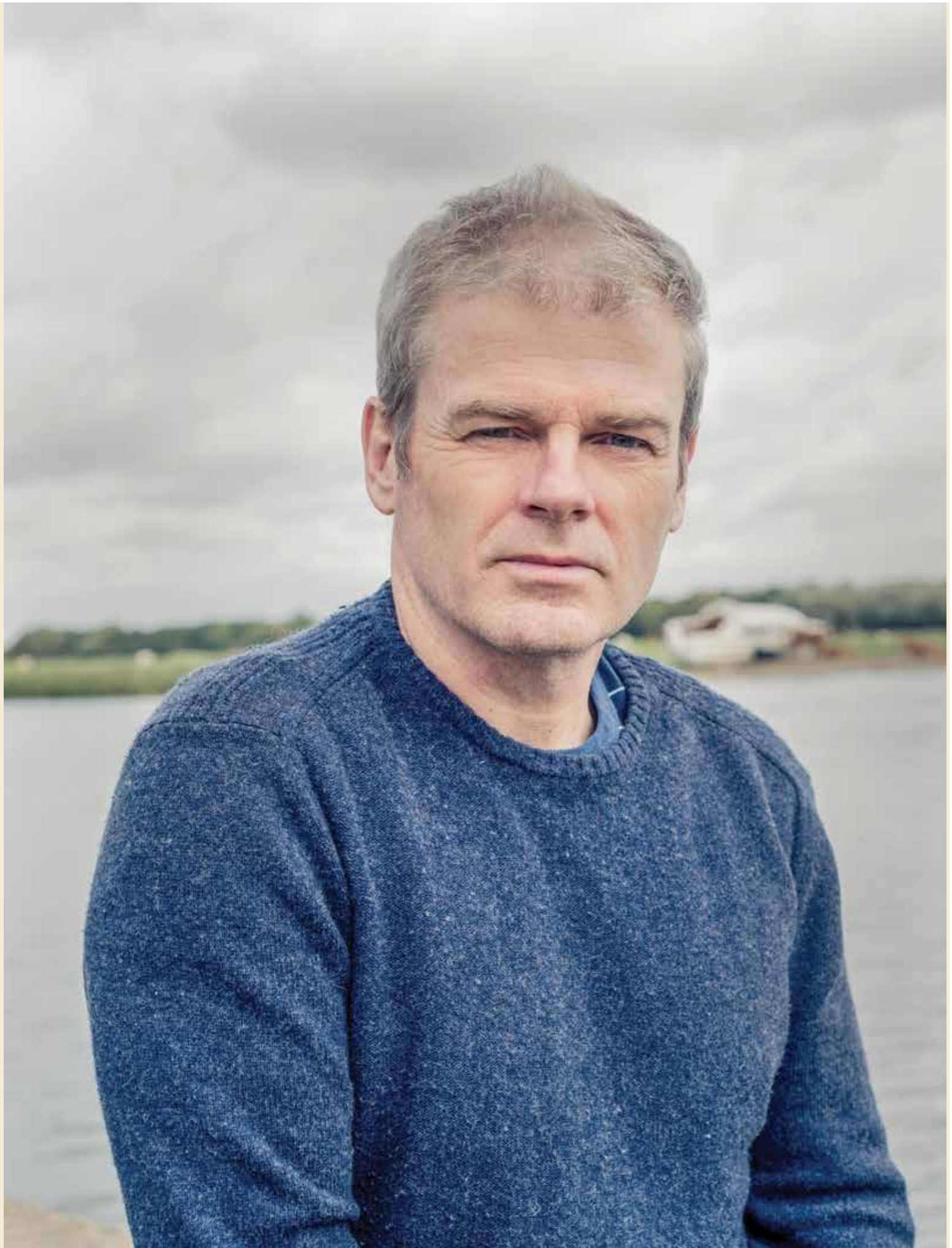
The Pier Falls

And Other Stories (2016)

"Unlike a lot of writers," Haddon told *Electric Lit*, "I think the short story has given me much more freedom than a novel. ... I would never set a novel on Mars because I would think that it's simply not going to work, and there is no point in trying to put a year's work into it just to have it go nowhere. But if it's a short story, I can take that risk." The nine stories in his dark, debut short fiction collection take many forms—science fiction, realism, Victorian journey, morality tale, and more. The thread: lonely, despairing characters limned with empathy and black humor. As Haddon writes in one tale, "Halfway through the meeting a cow will fall through the roof and it won't be anywhere near as funny as it sounds."

The title story begins with a crowded pier in a sunny English seaside resort town in 1970. When one key load-bearing rivet and then another collapses, slow-motion tragedy ensues, as the death toll mounts. In "The Gun," an O. Henry Award winner, a boy and his neighbor discover a handgun, which results in the slaughtering of a deer in a council tower-block. The 68-page "Wodwo" loosely reworks





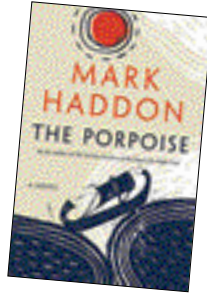
BOOKMARKS SELECTION



The Porpoise

THE STORY: When Maja, an actress 37 weeks pregnant, dies in a plane crash and her baby is torn from her alive, her wealthy, aristocratic widower, Philippe, strives to raise their beautiful daughter, Angelica, in a cocoon of wealth and privilege. But his love for the child soon turns obsessive, and then incestuous. When Angelica is 16, a young man, Darius, shatters their reclusive lives and discovers the truth about their relationship. In an attempt to rescue Angelica, he garners Philippe's murderous wrath and flees to a ship, *The Porpoise*. As Darius sails out of present-day Britain into classical mythology, he transforms into Pericles, Prince of Tyre, and embarks on epic sea voyages, adventures, and battles. As the novel moves back and forth between ancient times, the present day, and Elizabethan England, characters disappear and reappear as possible incarnations of a father and daughter, a king and a princess.

Doubleday. 320 pages. \$27.95. ISBN: 9780385544313



Guardian (UK)



"The extraordinary force and vividness of Haddon's prose ensure that *The Porpoise* reads not as a metatextual game but as a continually unfolding demonstration of the transporting power of stories. ... This is language that knows how to do things: sail a ship, make a gold buckle, negotiate the tides of the Thames." JUSTINE JORDAN

Minneapolis Star Tribune



"The early sections seem perfectly detailed, but later those details reveal themselves to actually be foreshadows, and the book reformulates itself to be even more perfect. There are dozens of one-liners worthy of being chiseled in stone." RANDY ROSENTHAL

Washington Post



"*The Porpoise* is so riveting that I found myself constantly pining to fall back into its labyrinth of swashbuckling adventure and feminist resistance." RON CHARLES

Independent (UK)



"Quite how much of the story reflects the level of Angelica's reality is left unclear: in her own world, she first stops speaking, refusing her father's advances, then stops eating. Her fate becomes intertwined with all the many women in her stories: abused, beaten, yet providing fantasies of escape and power." PHILIP WOMACK

New Yorker



"Now and then, the story's wild twists and pileups of incident hint sweetly at its teen-age creator. ... Haddon's book is almost more

evocative of pre-stories: of the phase before the story is told, when it is still indeterminate, unbound from words." KATY WALDMAN

New York Times Book Review



"Haddon's writing is beautiful, almost hallucinatory at times, and his descriptions so rich and lush and specific that smells and sights and tastes and sounds—foam smashing across a boat's deck; a breakfast of olives and barley bread soaked in wine; a woman trapped alive in a coffin—all but waft and dance off the page. ... It's not surprising that in such a complicated tapestry, the author has left a few threads loose." SARAH LYALL

NPR



"[D]escriptive passages bloat the story, but they are so gorgeous their beauty earns them the space they occupy. Similarly, while the structure will probably confuse casual readers, the author's imagination and his ability to deliver outstanding action sequences—not to mention his talent for using spare dialogue in devastating ways—mute the structural flaws." GABINO IGLESIAS

New York Journal of Books



"By turns riveting and repulsive, the sickening story of a father's descent into an incestuous relationship with his daughter is the more compelling narrative: difficult to read, yet impossible to put down. The story of Pericles, just as skillfully written, cannot quite keep up." LISA GUIDARINI

CRITICAL SUMMARY

"It would be a mistake to think of this novel as simply a contemporary version of Shakespeare," wrote the *New York Times Book Review*. "Haddon is playing a longer, more complicated game. It takes time to see what it is." With story lines that merge and diverge across geography and centuries, as well as genres that hopscotch from realism to tragedy, adventure, and mythology, "different worlds sometimes jut into each other as the narrative dances on the threshold between reality and imagination" (*Guardian*). Complicated, unconventional, daring, and at times uncomfortable, the novel—which gives voice and restores agency to women throughout—is highly worthwhile. The lush style and dazzling details that make the novel a masterpiece of storytelling can sometimes feel distracting. "The whole thing would be a postmodern mess if it weren't for Haddon's astounding skill as a storyteller," noted the *Washington Post*. But, in the end, *The Porpoise* is "a rough, bizarre, magical journey, and readers will not come out of it untouched" (NPR).

THE SOURCE MATERIAL

In *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*—written at least in part by Shakespeare—the King of Antioch is enjoying an incestuous relationship with his daughter. After solving a riddle posed by the king, Pericles, the young Prince of Tyre in Phoenicia, fears for his life and flees to the sea, embarking on dangerous, at times sorrowful, but ultimately fulfilling, adventures involving love, treachery, kidnappings, attempted murder, and more. John Gower, a poet from the English past, narrates this nautical tale. ■

Gawain and the Green Knight as a fractious, middle-class family convenes during Christmas. When an armed, black stranger (the Green Knight) knocks on the door, sudden violence erupts. “The Boys Who Left Home to Learn Fear” takes place in the 19th century, with British explorers on a doomed Amazon jungle expedition. And, in “The Woodpecker and the Wolf,” the crew of a ship stranded on Mars desperately waits for help, as their life-support system slowly expires. All of the tales, wrote the *Guardian*,

“are exuberant, lusty exercises in juxtaposition: intimacy and estrangement, exoticism and domesticity, innocuousness and malevolence, the cataloguing of minute detail and the expansiveness of the zoomed-out lens”—and of untold violence, desperation, and loss. ■

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

Gilbert's Gobstopper (1987)

In this short book, richly illustrated by Haddon and told from the perspective of a piece of candy, the young Gilbert buys and then loses his gobstopper. The all-day jawbreaker then embarks on a very long journey; it drops down the sewer and enters the ocean, where it is eaten by a fish and then caught by a fisherman; the candy eventually travels to outer space before returning to Gilbert, who is now an old man. “This irreverent entertainment will tickle many a funnybone,” wrote *School Library Journal*. Ages 4-8.



The Sea of Tranquility (1996)

Looking back over the years, Haddon recalls his own childhood fantasies of “rocketing across the cold, black miles and landing on crumbly rock” and his memory of 1969’s wondrous Apollo 11 mission to the moon, the two American astronauts “bouncing through the dust in the Sea of Tranquility.” The story includes facts about the actual landing. Illustrated by Christian Birmingham, the book “weaves the aspirations of the heart with history. Full-bleed illustrations, softly textured as if seen through the scrim of time, interpret the text with judicious sentiment” (*Publishers Weekly*). Ages 4-12.



Ocean Star Express (2001)

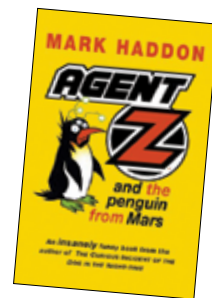
Joe, around five, and his parents are vacationing at the seaside Ocean Star Hotel. One rainy morning, the hotel owner invites Joe on a magical trip around the world via the Ocean Star Express, a miniature train that travels from room to room in the hotel attic and, subsequently,

to environments—from snowy mountains to deserts. When the vacation ends, Joe rides the Ocean Star Express in his dreams. Illustrated by Peter Sutton, this “sweet and simple story that young train enthusiasts will enjoy” (*Kirkus*) captures Joe’s delight and wonder. Ages 4-6.



Agent Z Series

Set in a present-day, unnamed British city, this four-book series, designed for young teens and filled with British humor and Briticisms, features Agent Z—a “front” used by friends Ben, Barney, and Jenks. Ben, the daydreaming narrator, employs his hallucinogenic imagination and his friends to wreak havoc on unsuspecting people by playing practical jokes. They leave a “Z” mark at the scene of each prank, which ranges from messing with the toilets at school to stealing a penguin from the zoo and disguising it as an alien. “Some of the practical jokes played by Ben, Barney and Jenks were practical jokes I played at school with (and on) my friends,” Haddon writes on his website. *Agent Z and the Penguin from Mars* was made into a 1996 Children’s BBC sitcom.



TITLES

- AGENT Z MEETS THE MASKED CRUSADER (1993)
- AGENT Z GOES WILD (1994)
- AGENT Z AND THE PENGUIN FROM MARS (1995)
- AGENT Z AND THE KILLER BANANAS (2001) ■