

*A Spot of Bother* by Mark Haddon

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To dispose of the inevitable question first: no, Mark Haddon's second novel is not as good as his wonderful debut novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. *A Spot of Bother* is less original and less poignant; it is also more than a hundred pages longer, without really justifying the extra volume by any greater substance.

That said, though, it has also to be said that it's really only by the high standard of his first book that Haddon's second falls short. It is, in its own right, an almost unflaggingly entertaining book, beautifully written, with a likeable cast of people who have just enough wrong with them to keep the plot going.

The eponymous Spot belongs to George Hall, a fifty-seven year old retired manufacturer of children's swings: conservative, decent, reserved, he would have been an unlikely fictional subject had it not been for the Spot; and even that is hardly sensational. It is, in fact, a spot of eczema that George decides must be cancer, in spite of his doctor's assurances to the contrary.

The spot, though, we gradually discover, is really only a catalyst for other processes, in effect George's complete mental breakdown in the midst of a blithely unaware family. Having grown old comfortably in the conviction that "The secret of contentment ... lay in ignoring many things completely", he prepares to face his own impending death and/or madness in the same stoic spirit. In this he is aided and abetted by a family as little inclined as he to talk about things they would rather ignore.

Jean, George's wife, has been having an affair with an ex-colleague of George's; George resolutely does not notice until he is, as it were, brought face to face with the fact, and even then he politely looks the other way. Katie, their daughter, has had a disastrous first marriage, and is about to marry, once again disastrously, or so her family fear: Ray, working class but prosperous, is good with Katie's son, but not terribly presentable socially. Jamie, their son, has unilaterally decided that his lover Tony won't feel at home at the wedding, and Tony has stormed out of Jamie's snug little bachelor pad and the relationship in high dudgeon. Even the accommodating Ray can no longer ignore the combined misgivings of the Hall clan and is ready to call the whole thing off.

Haddon's first novel was about an autistic boy. This one is about that mild but disabling form of autism called Englishness: the characters are chronically unable or unwilling to communicate, especially about such embarrassing things as feelings. Visiting her parents, Katie feels that "All she wanted was to get through lunch without too much friction and avoid some grisly woman-to-woman chat over the washing-up." When Ray tries to talk to Jamie about relationships, Jamie feels he has been cornered by "someone who had failed to grasp the most basic rules of human conversation." And as for George, "Talking was, in George's opinion, overrated."

Little wonder, then, that when George hits his spot of bother, he finds it impossible to reach out to his family; or when he does reach out, that they should pretend that nothing's the matter. As Jamie says, in a memorable outburst to his mother and sister, "He needs someone to listen to him or he's going to stick his head in the oven and we're all going to end up feeling like shit because we pretended there was nothing wrong."

*A Spot of Bother* is, amongst other things, a study of a nervous breakdown. It takes some skill and a bit of callousness to treat the subject in an essentially comic way, and Haddon is certainly up to the challenge, but nor does he shirk the darkness lurking on the periphery of his story: “With blinding clarity [George] realised that everyone was frolicking in a summer meadow surrounded by a dark and impenetrable forest, waiting for that grim day on which they were dragged into the dark beyond the trees and individually butchered.”

Haddon in fact gives us neither the summer meadow nor the dark forest: what he gives us is ordinary English suburbia with all hell let loose very politely. He glances at the tragic possibilities of his tale, only to subject them to the scrutiny of those uninvolved but interested bystanders who hang around most catastrophes clucking and smirking. The wedding in which the novel culminates is a tour de force of tragic-comic disaster, nicely pitched between the appalling and the hilarious, resolving almost too neatly most of the tensions that have been developed and sustained in the course of the novel.

It’s an odd phenomenon that well-meaning books and movies dealing with gays and straights trying to get on with one another feel obliged to end on a scene of everybody dancing together, preferably at a wedding reception, and this is no exception. Haddon’s succumbing to this stereotype is part of what makes this novel less original than its predecessor: what starts as a potentially disturbing examination of dysfunctional relationships ends as a feel-good romp. But nobody can seriously object to feeling good, and to all but the most curmudgeonly reader, *A Spot of Bother* will be the perfect book for the summer ahead.