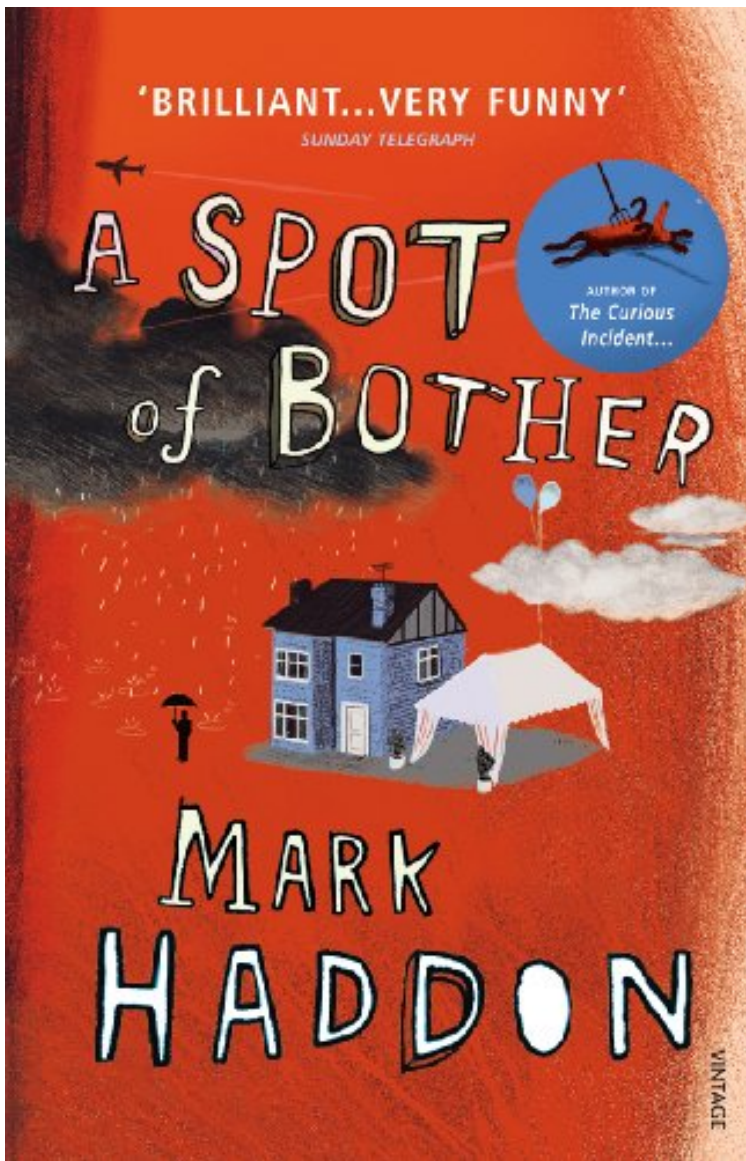


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A Spot of Bother



Par Mark Haddon
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAt fifty-seven, George is settling down to a comfortable retirement, building a shed in his garden, reading historical novels, listening to a bit of light jazz. Then Katie, his tempestuous daughter, announces that she is getting remarried, to Ray. Her family is not pleased - as her brother Jamie observes, Ray has 'strangler's hands'. Katie can't decide if she loves Ray, or loves the way he cares for her son Jacob, and her mother Jean is a bit put out by the way the wedding planning gets in the way of her affair with one of her husband's former colleagues. And the tidy and pleasant life Jamie has created crumbles when he fails to invite his lover, Tony, to the dreaded nuptials.Unnoticed in the uproar, George discovers a sinister lesion on his hip, and quietly begins to lose his mind.ExtraitIt began when George was trying on a black suit in

Allders the week before Bob Greens funeral. It was not the prospect of the funeral that had unsettled him. Nor Bob dying. To be honest he had always found Bobs locker-room bonhomie slightly tiring and he was secretly relieved that they would not be playing squash again. Moreover, the manner in which Bob had died (a heart attack while watching the Boat Race on television) was oddly reassuring. Susan had come back from her sisters and found him lying on his back in the center of the room with one hand over his eyes, looking so peaceful she thought initially that he was taking a nap. It would have been painful, obviously. But one could cope with pain. And the endorphins would have kicked in soon enough, followed by that sensation of ones life rushing before ones eyes which George himself had experienced several years ago when he had fallen from a stepladder, broken his elbow on the rockery and passed out, a sensation which he remembered as being not unpleasant (a view from the Tamar Bridge in Plymouth had figured prominently for some reason).

The same probably went for that tunnel of bright light as the eyes died, given the number of people who heard the angels calling them home and woke to find a junior doctor standing over them with a defibrillator. Then . . . nothing. It would have been over. It was too early, of course. Bob was sixty-one. And it was going to be hard for Susan and the boys, even if Susan did blossom now that she was able to finish her own sentences. But all in all it seemed a good way to go. No, it was the lesion which had thrown him. He had removed his trousers and was putting on the bottom half of the suit when he noticed a small oval of puffed flesh on his hip, darker than the surrounding skin and flaking slightly. His stomach rose and he was forced to swallow a small amount of vomit which appeared at the back of his mouth. Cancer. He had not felt like this since John Zinewskis Fireball had capsized several years ago and he had found himself trapped underwater with his ankle knotted in a loop of rope. But that had lasted for three or four seconds at most. And this time there was no one to help him right the boat. He would have to kill himself. It was not a comforting thought but it was something he could do, and this made him feel a little more in control of the situation. The only question was how. Jumping from a tall building was a terrifying idea, easing your center of gravity out over the edge of the parapet, the possibility that you might change your mind halfway down. And the last thing he needed at this point was more fear. Hanging needed equipment and he possessed no gun. If he drank enough whiskey he might be able to summon the courage to crash the car. There was a big stone gateway on the A16 this side of Stamford. He could hit it doing 90 mph with no difficulty whatsoever. But what if his nerve failed? What if he were too drunk to control the car? What if someone pulled out of the drive? What if he killed them, paralyzed himself and died of cancer in a wheelchair in prison? Sir...? Would you mind accompanying me back into the store? A young man of eighteen or thereabouts was staring down at George. He had ginger sideburns and a navy blue uniform several sizes too large for him. George realized that he was crouching on the tiled threshold outside the shop. Sir...?George got to his feet. Im terribly sorry.Would you mind accompanying me...?George looked down and saw that he was still wearing the suit trousers with the fly undone. He buttoned it rapidly. Of course. He walked back through the doors then made his way between the handbags and the perfumes toward the menswear department with the security guard at his shoulder. I appear to have had some kind of turn. Youll have to discuss that with the manager, Im afraid, sir. The black thoughts which had filled his mind only seconds before seemed to have occurred a very long time ago. True, he was a little unsure on his feet, the way you were after slicing your thumb with a chisel, for example, but he felt surprisingly good given the circumstances. The manager of the menswear department was standing bedside a rack of slippers with his hands crossed over his groin. Thank you, John. The security guard gave him a deferential little nod, turned on his heels and walked away. Now, Mr... Hall. George Hall. My apologies. I . . . Perhaps we should have a word in my office, said the manager. A woman appeared carrying Georges trousers. He left these in the changing room. His wallets in the pocket. George pressed on. I think I had some kind of blackout. I really didnt mean to cause any trouble. How good it was to be talking to other people. Them saying something. Him saying something in return. The steady ticktock of conversation. He could have carried on like this all afternoon. Are you all right, sir? The woman cupped a hand beneath his elbow and he slid downward and sideways onto a chair which felt more solid, more comfortable and more supportive than he remembered any chair ever feeling. Things became slightly vague for a few minutes. Then a cup of tea was placed into his hands.Thank you. He sipped. It was not good tea but it was hot, it was in a proper china mug and holding it was a comfort. Perhaps we should call you a taxi. It was probably best, he thought, to head back to the village and buy the suit another day. 2He decided not to mention the incident to Jean. She would only want to talk about it and this was not an appealing proposition. Talking was, in Georges opinion, overrated. You could not turn the television on these days without seeing someone discussing their adoption or explaining why they had stabbed their husband. Not that he was averse to

talking. Talking was one of life's pleasures. And everyone needed to sound off now and then over a pint of Ruddles about colleagues who did not shower frequently enough, or teenage sons who had returned home drunk in the small hours and thrown up in the dogs basket. But it did not change anything. The secret of contentment, George felt, lay in ignoring many things completely. How anyone could work in the same office for ten years or bring up children without putting certain thoughts permanently to the back of their mind was beyond him. And as for that last grim lap when you had a catheter and no teeth, memory loss seemed like a godsend. He told Jean that he had found nothing in Allders and would drive back into town on

Monday when he did not have to share Peterborough with forty thousand other people. Then he went upstairs to the bathroom and stuck a large plaster over the lesion so that it could no longer be seen. He slept soundly for most of the night and woke only when Ronald Burrows, his long-dead geography teacher, pressed a strip of duct tape over his mouth and hammered a hole through the wall of George's chest with a long metal spike. Oddly, it was the smell which upset him most, a smell like the smell of a poorly cleaned public toilet which has recently been used by a very ill person, heady and curried, a smell, worst of all, which seemed to be coming from the wound in his own body. He fixed his eyes on the tasseled lampshade above his head and waited for his heart to slow down, like a man pulled from a burning building, still not quite able to believe that he is safe. Six o'clock. He slid out of bed and went downstairs. He put two slices of

bread into the toaster and took down the espresso maker Jamie had given them for Christmas. It was a ridiculous gadget which they kept on show for diplomatic reasons. But it felt good now, filling the reservoir with water, pouring coffee into the funnel, slotting the rubber seal into place and screwing the aluminium sections together. Oddly reminiscent of Gareth's steam engine which George had been allowed to play with during the infamous visit to Poole in 1953. And a good deal better than sitting watching the trees at the far end of the garden swaying like sea monsters while a kettle boiled. The blue flame sighed under the metal base of the coffeemaker. Indoor camping. A bit of an adventure. The toast pinged up. That was the weekend, of course, when Gareth burned the frog. How strange, looking back, that the course of an entire life should be spelled out so clearly in five minutes during one August afternoon. He spread butter and marmalade on

the toast while the coffee gargled through. He poured the coffee into a mug and took a sip. It was hair-raisingly strong. He added milk till it became the color of dark chocolate then sat down and picked up the RIBA Journal which Jamie had left on his last visit. The Azman Owen house. Timber shuttering, sliding glass doors, Bauhaus dining chairs, the single vase of white lilies on the table. Dear God. Sometimes he longed to see a pair of discarded Y-fronts in an architectural photograph. High-frequency constant-amplitude electric internal vibrators were specified for the compaction, to minimize blowholes and to produce a uniform compaction effort . . . The house looked like a bunker. What was it about concrete? In five hundred years were people going to stand under bridges on the M6 admiring the stains? He put the magazine down and started the Telegraph crossword. Nanosecond. Byzantium. Quiff. Jean appeared at seven thirty wearing

her purple bathrobe. #8220...From Publishers Weekly If the reader were to give a voice to Haddon's protagonist, it would sound just like Keating's. George is an introverted, mild-mannered 61-year-old newly retired Brit who wants to ignore the emotional undertow of his conventional, middle-class family. Without trying to act out the characters, Keating clearly delineates each: George's wife (who is having an affair), his daughter (who is about to embark on another disastrous marriage), her fianc (whose cockney accent highlights class antagonisms) and his son (who fears bringing his male lover to the wedding). To avoid the family fracas, George focuses on his eczema-the "spot of bother" of the title-convinced that it is cancer and that he will die soon. Keating tries to establish a lighthearted tone, but Haddon's descriptions of the

characters' misery, especially George's rapid descent into madness, are too graphic to be comical. Tone aside, Haddon writes well and Keating reads well, so many listeners will enjoy this contemporary British family portrait in which everyone will live relatively happily ever after-if only they can learn to communicate with one another. Simultaneous release with the Doubleday hardcover (s, July 17). Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.