

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Murder on the Orient Express

A reader's guide to the author and her work.



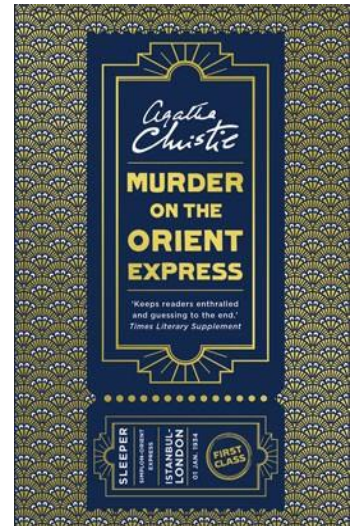
Literary Monographs

by

Susannah Fullerton

Bring together a luxury train, a snowy landscape outside, a corpse on board, a group of suspects trapped in a confined space, and a funny little Belgian man with an egg-shaped head ... and the scene is set for one of Agatha Christie's most famous novels, and one for which she had a particular fondness. *Murder on the Orient Express* was first published in 1934, at a cost of seven shillings and sixpence per copy, and it has never been out of print since.

I love reading good murder mysteries. I love the sense of closure when the criminal is found out and brought to justice, I enjoy being part of the chase, I love the puzzle and knowing that I should try and pick up clues as I read. And of course, Agatha Christie is probably the most famous writer of mysteries of all time. Come with me on a literary exploration of one of her classic novels.



AGATHA CHRISTIE



Agatha Christie was a phenomenon. She took a fairly simple form of entertainment that was moderately popular at the time and through it she made herself a household name. Her novels have been translated into more languages than Shakespeare and she is the most translated individual author (currently 103 languages), her play has broken all records, she is the world's bestselling novelist and she is known as 'the Queen of Crime'.

By all accounts she was a perfectly nice woman, and yet she created a huge number of corpses – through strangulation, poison, stabbings, pistol shots, and a host of other ghastly ways. At the same time she managed to give her readers a sense of order and control, she never distresses them with the horrors of a crime. In fact, she excelled in what should be a contradiction in terms – a 'cosy murder' in a genteel setting (usually English).

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born in Torquay, Devon, on 15 September 1890. Her childhood as part of an upper middle-class family was a happy one – she was the youngest of three children, her American father was well enough off not to have to work, and Agatha received a good education at home, plus musical training (she was a talented pianist).



Agatha and her mother Clara

As her siblings were much older, she was in many ways an only child and invented playmates and made up stories, writing her first poem at the age of ten. She adored mathematics and her novels show a fascination with numbers and puzzles (it was no coincidence that her 80th title was published on her 80th birthday!).



Agatha as a girl

She was a shy girl who could possibly have been a concert pianist had she not so hated performing in public.

“One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is to have a happy childhood.”



But then her family's wealth diminished and her father felt he should take the extreme step of finding a job. He went out looking for one, but then died of a heart attack when Agatha was eleven, leaving his wife Clara and his daughter in reduced economic circumstances. She briefly attended a school in Torquay but never adapted to school life. In 1905 she was sent off to finishing school in Paris.

As her mother's health was uncertain (Clara suffered from serious asthma), the two women travelled to Egypt to join Agatha's sister Madge who was living there for a time. Agatha's coming out' was in Cairo and there she saw places that would later appear in novels such as *Death on the Nile*.

Agatha was tall and pretty, with red hair and grey eyes. She received many proposals and even accepted one, but back in England before the war she met handsome Archie Christie, who roared into her life on his motorbike, and fell madly in love with him.

Despite her mother's disapproval, they married in 1914, and while he was away at the front, she worked in the dispensary of Torquay Hospital – an excellent place to learn about poisons, doses of medicine etc.



Archie Christie in 1915



Agatha and Archie Christie in 1919

Agatha had already written a novel called *Snow on the Desert*, set in Cairo, which had been rejected by various publishers. However, while working in the Torquay dispensary, she wrote her first detective story. Her sister made a bet with her that she could not write a crime novel – Agatha responded to the challenge. She had always loved *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, so writing a detective story seemed natural to her. Three publishers turned her book down. One then sat on it and Agatha all but forgot about it.

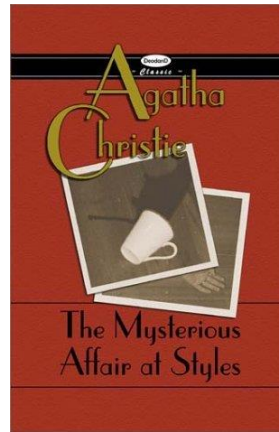


Agatha Christie and her daughter Rosalind

After the war she and Archie took a flat in St John's Wood, London. Their only child, Rosalind, was born in 1919. Archie took a job in the city and took up golf, a game Agatha came to loathe.

Then suddenly, the publisher offered to publish her book, and *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* featuring a little Belgian detective called Hercule Poirot, appeared in 1920. Little did she dream how sick of him she would grow and how internationally famous he would become!

Her next book was *The Secret Adversary*, featuring Tommy and Tuppence Beresford who would never capture the hearts of the reading public in the way that Poirot and Miss Marple did. She earned £50 for it.



Setting off on a world tour with Archie in 1922

She and Archie left England for a year and travelled to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand on a most unusual journey connected with the British Exhibition of 1923 (covered in *Brief Encounters* by Susannah Fullerton).

Agatha had always loved swimming, even though she once nearly drowned off Torquay, and a highlight of the voyage was learning to surf in Hawaii. In fact, she and Archie were some of the very first British people to learn to stand up on boards and surf the waves.

"I like living. I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow; but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing."



Surfing at Honolulu in 1922

Once home in England, Archie played golf and began an affair with his secretary, Nancy. Agatha was lonely. Her mother had recently died, and she was further devastated when Archie asked her for a divorce.

After his divorce from Agatha, Archie married Nancy Neele in 1928, and they lived happily together until she died in 1958.

MRS. CHRISTIE FOUND AT HARROGATE

Dramatic Re-union With Husband in Famous Hydro.

"HER MEMORY GONE"

How Missing Novelist Spent Time While Police and Public Looked for Her

Mrs. Christie, the missing inventor of detective stories, was traced last night to the Hydro, Harrogate, by her husband, Colonel Christie.

In an interview after a dramatic meeting between the pair, Colonel Christie told the DAILY HERALD that his wife had suffered from the "most complete loss of memory." She did not even recognise him, he added.



Mrs. Christie

"She does not know why she is here."
—Col. Christie



Col. Christie

In 1926 she suffered some sort of breakdown and disappeared – the reasons remain mysterious to this day.

Her car was found on the Berkshire Downs and it was thought she had died – the papers were full of the mystery of the missing mystery writer.

She was eventually found in Harrogate Hydropathic Hotel, where she had registered under the name of her husband's mistress, and where she sat and discussed the search for herself with other guests. Finally, one guest recognised her, and Archie came to bring her home.

The publicity did wonders for her new book, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and many thought at the time that it was all a publicity stunt. Was she suffering from amnesia, was it all a plan to get revenge on her husband, or was she genuinely depressed and confused?

The 1979 movie *Agatha*, starring Vanessa Redgrave and Timothy Dalton, gives an imaginary solution to what happened. Agatha herself refused to mention the episode in her autobiography, or ever discuss it with journalists.

She agreed to a divorce from Archie in 1928 and soon started to travel to archaeological digs to take her mind off her unhappiness at losing Archie.

There she met Max Mallowan – she was 40 and he was 26; he was Catholic, she was Protestant. They married in Edinburgh in 1930 (and falsified their ages on the certificate) and every year went happily together to Syria, Jordan, Egypt etc for archaeological work.

"Very few of us are what we seem."



Max Mallowan and Agatha Christie married in September 1930, just six months after first meeting each other.



Room 411 at the Pera Palace hotel in Istanbul, Turkey, the room where Agatha Christie wrote *Murder on the Orient Express*.

While Max examined ancient objects, Agatha created fictional corpses, often using the settings of the digs as the location for murder. *Murder on the Orient Express* was written in the Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul (and her room there has been preserved as it was by the hotel).

Many other novels use Torquay and its surrounds as a setting. She wrote 'serious' novels under the name Mary Westmacott (these include *Giant's Bread*, *Unfinished Portrait*, *Absent in the Spring* and *The Burden*, amongst others), she wrote short stories and she produced at least one new book per year.

*"An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have.
The older she gets the more interested he is in her."*

In 1927 a character called Miss Jane Marple first appeared in a volume of short stories, and of course would then appear in many more books.

Christie wrote final books about both Poirot and Miss Marple (*Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder*) and put them into bank vaults where they sat for thirty years, but they were both published before her death once she realised she would not be able to write more novels. She did grow heartily sick of both characters, so must have had a certain satisfaction in knowing that she had written their last cases.



Angela Lansbury as Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd*, 1980



Greenway House

In 1938 the Mallowans purchased the Greenway estate in Devon and Agatha, who loved house decorating, filled the home with her possessions. Today Greenway, which overlooks the beautiful River Dart, is the property of the National Trust and has a huge number of visitors each year (you have to book a timed visit there). She filled the house with her various collections – of china, of boxes, of pictures, etc. I have rarely seen such a cluttered home, but it is very redolent of her personality and visitors can

hear her voice from an old recording as they look around the rooms.



Agatha Christie and Max Mallowan at their house, Greenway

Many of her novels use Greenway and its extensive grounds as a setting, while Abney Hall in Cheshire (home of her brother in law) became a model for the grand country houses in her fiction.



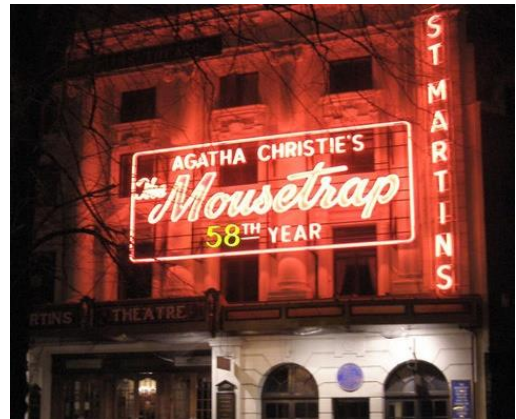
Winterbrook House

In 1934 she and Max bought Winterbrook House in Wallingford, and Agatha moved happily between her two homes, writing prolifically in both of them.

During World War II, with Max in the Home Guard, Agatha returned to a dispensary to update her skills and knowledge of poisons.

During the war her plays were very popular (she turned many of her own books into plays). In November 1952 her play *The Mousetrap* was performed for the first time – it has been performed in London ever since.

She gave the rights to this play to her grandson, thinking it might bring him in a bit of pocket money – it has of course kept him well supplied with money ever since.



Her son-in-law was killed in the war and Agatha saw a great deal of her daughter and only grandchild Matthew, who eventually inherited the rights to her works. Year after year she wrote detective novels which always sold extremely well. Some of her best include *Five Little Pigs*, *Dead Man's Folly*, *Murder at the Vicarage*, *Cat Among the Pigeons*, *And Then There Were None*, *The Body in the Library*, *Sparkling Cyanide*, *Peril at End House*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Evil under the Sun* and *Death on the Nile*.



Agatha Christie's daughter Rosalind Hicks, with grandson Matthew

Her writing quality is remarkably even, the length of her books always about the same, and of course her detective figures make very regular appearances, and never seem to age. The character of Mrs Ariadne Oliver also appeared – she sometimes works with Poirot on a case. Parts of her are based on Agatha herself – she munches apples as she writes, and she has created a bony Finnish detective, of whom she grows heartily weary.

Agatha was a formidable woman who always regarded her writing as a craft rather than an art. She wrote poetry for pleasure all her life. She was a reserved woman who hated crowds and attending parties with lots of talking going on. She did not drink alcohol and her favourite drink was a glass of cream which she drank from a large cup which had 'Don't be greedy' written on its side (hardly surprising that she put on weight in her late years), she hated lukewarm food and cigarette smoke, and she attended church regularly and gave money for a lovely stained glass window in a local church, done in her favourite colours of green and purple.

At the age of 75 she wrote an autobiography, which tells nothing about the famous disappearance. She was loaded with honours – a CBE, DBE, crime writers' awards, honorary degrees and dinner with the Queen.

Films were made of her novels – Margaret Rutherford was a badly miscast Miss Marple, but other Miss Marples have included Joan Hickson, Angela Lansbury, Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie. Poirot has been acted by Austin Trevor, Albert Finney, Peter Ustinov, Ian Holm, Alfred Molina and David Suchet (whose aim is to act in film versions of every Poirot novel and short story).



Agatha Christie with her second husband Max Mallowan



In the early 1970s her health began to fail, and it is thought she might have been suffering from dementia. Agatha Christie died on 12 January 1976, aged 85. She died at her home in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, and is buried nearby. Max died in 1978.

Poirot is the only fictional character to have been given an obituary in *The New York Times*. She had set up a private company, Agatha Christie Ltd, which today controls her rights and literary estate (currently run by her great-grandson James). The Agatha Christie Society was founded by her daughter Rosalind in 1993.

Agatha Christie left to the world sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections. Her best-selling book, and the one that has been voted her most popular, is *And Then There were None*.

“Good advice is always certain to be ignored, but that's no reason not to give it.”

MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS

Published in 1934 by William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. In London, and in the USA as *Murder in the Calais Coach* by Dodd, Mead & Co. of New York, *Murder on the Orient Express* was an instant hit. It was written during 1933, on an archaeological dig in Arpachiyah and in Istanbul.

The novel, like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, plays an audacious confidence trick on its readers. Some readers were not happy with its solution – Raymond Chandler despised it, finding it improbable and ridiculous – but most critics were very favourable. Dorothy L. Sayers, herself a superb mystery writer, described it as “a murder mystery conceived and carried out on the finest classical lines”, while Compton McKenzie called it “a capital example of its class”. Christie’s solution was, in its day, startlingly innovative.

The novel rapidly became a classic of the genre. It takes place in a confined space, where every suspect is trapped in one place. The detective arrives, uses his brain, and solves the crime.

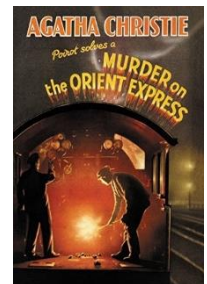
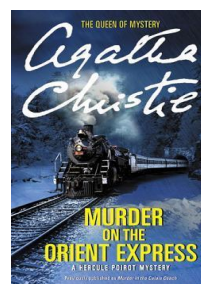
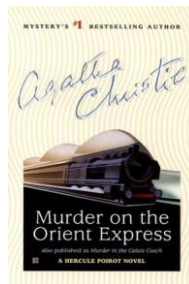
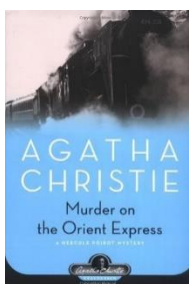
“Nobody knows what another person is thinking. They may imagine they do, but they are nearly always wrong.”

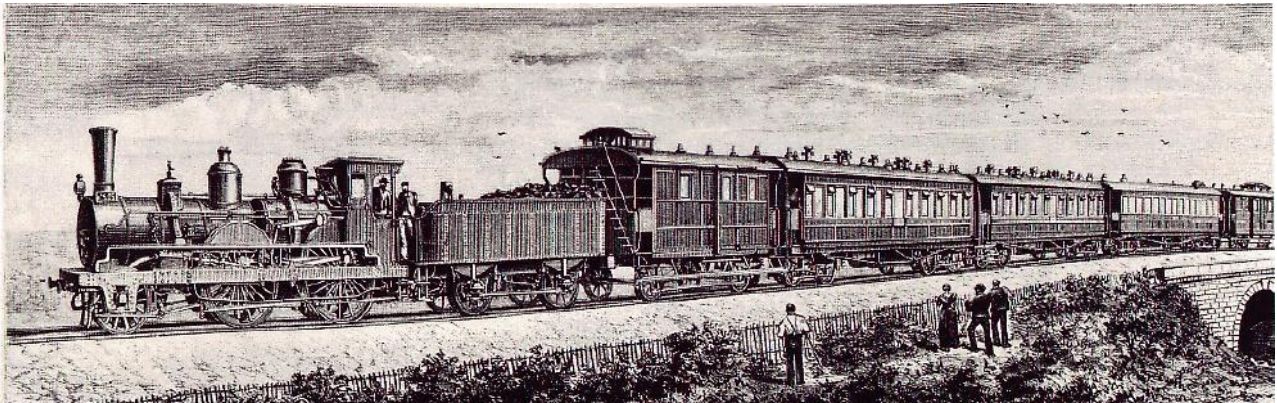
Background

The Train

The luxury long-distance passenger train service known as the Orient Express was created in 1883 by Belgian businessman Georges Nagelmackers. Originally called the ‘Express d’Orient’, it travelled from Paris. The name was changed to the Orient Express in 1891. The route has changed frequently. The original terminus was Vienna, then Varna in Bulgaria from whence passengers could take a boat to Constantinople, but in 1889 the train took passengers all the way to Constantinople.

The service was suspended during WWI, and after that the train took a more leisurely route via the Simplon Tunnel, Milan, Venice and Trieste (this became known as the Simplon Orient Express). By the 1930s there were three train services travelling from Paris to Istanbul via slightly different





The first Orient Express in 1883

routes. This was when the train gained its reputation for luxury and sophistication, with royalty (Carol II of Romania, Leopold II of Belgium, Ferdinand I of Bulgaria), celebrities such as Marlene Dietrich and Lawrence of Arabia, and business people taking the trip.

During WWII the train service was again stopped, and then the closure of the Yugoslav / Greek border prevented some services from running. By 1962 there was only the Simplon Orient Express still running and in 1977 the Paris – Istanbul train completed its last journey. However, a service under the name of Orient Express did continue to run from Paris to Bucharest, and the very last train with that name went in 2009. Today various privately run trains using the same name do continue to make parts of the original journey.

The famous train has been a big part of popular culture. Dracula takes the Orient Express, the train features in *La Madonne des Sleepings* by Maurice Dekobra, Graham Greene writes about it in *Stamboul Train* and *Travels with my Aunt*, Flashman uses the train in *Flashman and the Tiger*, James Bond encounters danger on it in *From Russia with Love* and Paul Theroux writes of it in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. It has been used in many movies – *Romance on the Orient Express*, *102 Dalmations*, *Around the World in 80 Days* and *Minder on the Orient Express*, amongst others.



The original Orient Express became part of history in 2009 when the route disappeared from European railway timetables, a victim of high-speed trains and cut-rate airlines.

Today the Orient Express is operated by private tour companies using renovated cars from the 1920s and 30s running from London to Venice and other destinations in Europe, including the original route from Paris to Istanbul.



Orient Express cars of the 1930s

The train fascinated Agatha Christie: “When I had travelled to France or Spain or Italy, the Orient Express had often been standing at Calais, and I had longed to climb up into it.” She took a trip on it in 1931. She had been with her husband Max at an archaeological dig, but she went home alone just before Christmas, and had a memorable journey. “What a journey”, she wrote to her husband. “Started out from Stamboul in a violent thunder storm. We went very slowly during the night and about 3am stopped altogether. I thought we were at a frontier at about 8 o’clock... so I got up, discovered we were in the middle of nowhere and perturbed officials hurrying up and down the train who said the line has flooded further along...” The passengers all enjoyed breakfast, there were rumours of a twelve-hour delay, then snow began to fall. At one stage they all had to get out and walk, they were squashed into a single coach without food (Agatha shared biscuits and chocolate with the others) and finally she made it to her destination two days late. Some of the people she met would prove a starting point for the characters in her novel.

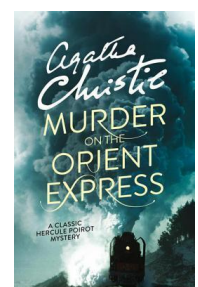
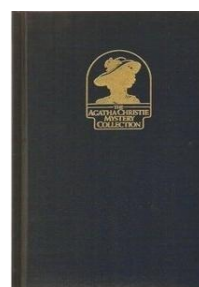
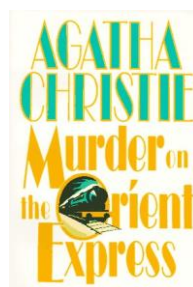
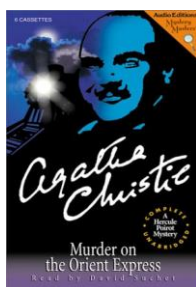
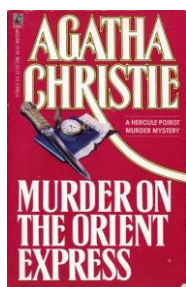
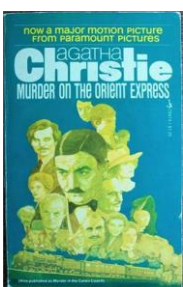
Then in 1933 she went most of the way to and from Arpachiyah on it and was able to check details



The Orient Express train as it appears in the 2017 movie adaptation.

for her story: “On the way back I was able to check on things I had thought about on the way out. I had to see where all the switches were. After he had read my book, one man actually made the journey to check up on this.”

“The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances.”



The Kidnapping

The other source of inspiration for the book was the 1932 kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's infant son, also named Charles. The famous aviator had made his first solo flight across the Atlantic in 1927 and he was big news. His little boy was taken from the family mansion one night, the FBI were called in, but the child's body was found close to the house – he had been killed on the night of the kidnapping. The kidnapper and murderer was Bruno Hauptmann, who went to the electric chair protesting his innocence. The case spurred Congress to pass the Federal Kidnapping Act. The fictitious Armstrong case in *Murder on the Orient Express* was based on this case and was suggested to Agatha by her husband Max, so she was tying her novel to a sensational and instantly recognisable news hook. She dedicated the book to him as a way of saying thanks.



Bruno Richard Hauptmann, convicted of killing Charles Lindbergh, Jr.

Justice

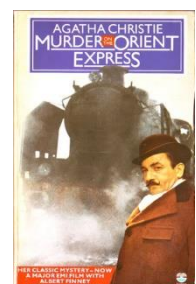
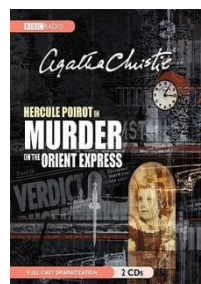
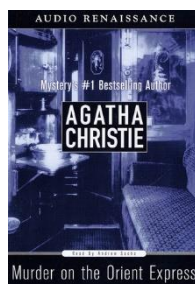
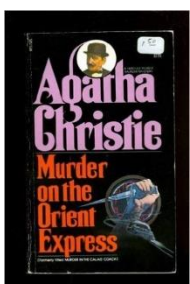
In the legal world, the 'jury' is a symbol of justice. Twelve impartial people are chosen to make a decision about the innocence or guilt of a person in the dock. In *Murder on the Orient Express* it is twelve people who decide that Ratchett must die, and they all share in murdering him. They are a self-appointed jury, unlike a jury in a courtroom who would not be chosen had they a family interest in the case. The novel explores the idea of the jury and justice.

Was Ratchett, or Casetti, really guilty? We are told that he "gave the law the slip", but that does not necessarily mean he committed the crime. Christie never provides definite proof that he was guilty.



Johnny Depp as Samuel Ratchett, 2017 movie adaptation

The novel also shows that sometimes the law is insufficient and there are many ways of breaking it. Ratchett has been able to slip away from the American police by using "a secret hold he had



over various persons” (ie, blackmail) and by means of his great wealth. Poirot, searching Hardman’s suitcase finds bottles of liquor which he plans to put into bottles labelled ‘Hairwash’ so as to get around Prohibition in the USA. He is technically breaking the law by doing so, but is totally unconcerned about this.



Richard Widmark as Samuel Ratchett, 1974 movie adaptation

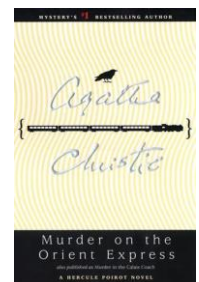
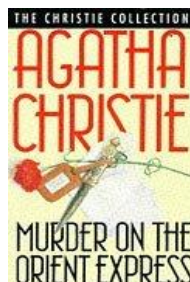
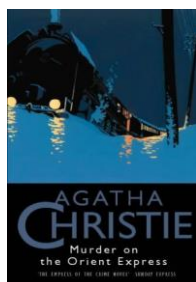
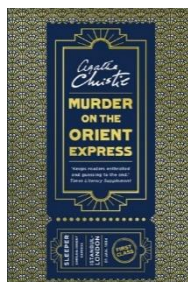
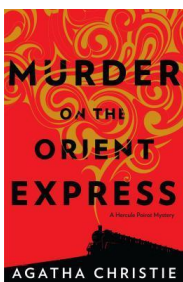
The book discusses the morality of murder. If the law fails to punish a criminal, are private citizens justified in doing so? Is it permissible to kill a man even when the law has acquitted him, or is it a moral outrage in any circumstances whatsoever? Mary Debenham feels that God wants her to exact justice: “When you’ve been denied justice ... you are incomplete. It feels that God has abandoned you in a dark place. I asked God ... I think we all did ... what we should do, and he said do what is right.”

The reader is forced to question what true justice really is – legal justice or human justice – and whether or not justice can be served outside of the legal system. Is this a book about the triumph of logic over law, or does it glorify revenge? As a writer, Agatha Christie is usually

very black and white about crime and the need to punish it, but in this novel the lines are vaguer. Each reader must decide whether the twelve men and women are instruments of justice or lynch mob. Is trial by jury really a fair way of establishing justice?

The novel was written at a time when capital punishment was still in force. Reference is made in the novel to the electric chair, used in America for execution of convicted criminals (as in the Lindbergh case), and to the guillotine, which was last used for execution in France in 1977. The last use of capital punishment in the UK, which used hanging, was in 1964. Christie knew, as do Poirot and Miss Marple, that finding a person guilty has deeply serious consequences, and that getting it wrong is not an option.

“Is this murder the work of some rival gang whom Casetti had double-crossed in the past, or is it an act of private vengeance?”



Food



Kenneth Branagh (Hercule Poirot) and Michelle Pfeiffer (Caroline Hubbard) shoot a scene in the dining car, 2017 movie adaptation

The serving of food is an important aspect of *Murder on the Orient Express*. It is used to structure the story and give a sense of time passing. The dining car is taken over by Poirot and M. Bouc for discussion and interviews, but meals are never forgotten.

Straight after viewing the bloody corpse of the murdered man, Poirot

heads for the dining car and eats a full meal. Poirot considers the case carefully while he lunches and only after finishing his food does he reveal to the doctor and M. Bouc the result of his deliberations. The people on the train are living in a state of great disorder – a snowstorm, a sudden death, etc. Food and the regular provision of meals helps to bring both order and sophistication to the narrative. The types of food mentioned also give the novel part of its period charm today. The characters eat omelettes, soup, boiled fish, delicate cream cheese, and they drink Perrier, orange juice and cognac. The regular and delicious meals add to the feeling of luxury on board the train.

“Poirot sat down and soon found himself in the favoured position of being at the table which was served first and with the choicest morsels. The food, too, was unusually good.”

Setting and Style

The novel is set in the early 1930s, between the wars. There are several glancing references to WWI, but little discussion of the Great Depression and the economic downturn which was having a devastating effect on many.

Agatha Christie was not a prose stylist. Her writing is easy, straightforward and accessible, she moves her story along at a smart pace and gives her readers an unadorned tale. It is narrated from the third person omniscient point of view, all anchored by the perspective and experiences of Hercule Poirot. For the most part, the reader gets exactly the same information as he does – we are given the opportunity to come up with the answers before he reaches his conclusions, or to



Albert Finney as Hercule Poirot, 1974 movie adaptation

challenge him. Critic Edmund Wilson complained that Christie's style was mawkish and banal, but she decided early on that the crime and its solution were what mattered most, and that a literary style might only get in the way of that purpose. It would be left to her contemporary Dorothy L. Sayers, or to later crime novelists such as PD James, to show that crime and a more complex writing style could be mixed.

There is much that is theatrical in the style of this novel. One can tell that Agatha Christie was an experienced writer of plays. There is a great deal of dialogue – the series of scenes where Poirot interviews all the passengers

consists almost entirely of speech. And at the end of the book there is the grand theatrical climax, when Poirot gathers all the suspects together to explain the crime. It is easy to picture this scene on a stage as the dramatic climax to the whole.

Characters

"If you are to be Hercule Poirot, you must think of everything."

Hercule Poirot, the Belgian detective, is one of the most famous fictional detectives in the world. He even has his own Wikipedia entry [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hercule_Poirot!](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hercule_Poirot) Agatha Christie grew heartily weary of her creation and called him a "detestable, bombastic, tiresome, ego-centric little creep". But the public adored him, so she was stuck with him, and he was for her a wonderful source of bread and butter.

Short, with an egg-shaped head and luxurious moustaches, fussy and vain, Poirot prides himself on using the 'little grey cells' to solve crimes.

This is once again the case in *Murder on the Orient Express* – Part III is called 'Hercule Poirot Sits Back and Thinks'. He knows that he must use his intellect to find the perpetrator of the



Kenneth Branagh as Hercule Poirot, 2017 movie adaptation

crime. There's a moment in section III when Christie gives us the thought processes of three men – Poirot, M. Bouc and Dr Constantine. The doctor's thoughts wander into pornography, M. Bouc begins to consider the repair of the train, but Poirot focuses intently on the case. He comes to see that no single person could have committed the crime and that every person on the train has some connection with the Armstrong household. The case excites him: "What to my mind is so interesting in this case is that we have none of the facilities afforded to the police ... We have to rely solely on deduction." However, in spite of Poirot's boasts, in this novel he seems to reach a solution more by inspired guessing than deductive reasoning. He works out that all the conspirators are connected to the Armstrong household by a "scheme of guessing" and his guesses are often based on racial and class stereotypes. For example, he assumes the Italian was the chauffeur because he thinks of Italians as lower class and talkative; early in the story he refuses to assist Ratchett because he thinks the man "looks evil". On the train he is an interruption and a problem – most of the passengers wish, like Christie herself, that Poirot would just go away.

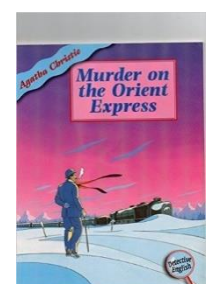
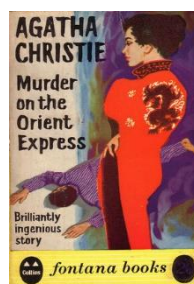
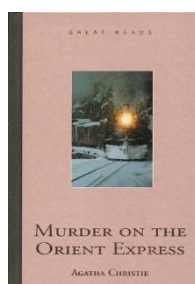
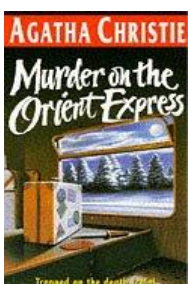


David Suchet starred as Poirot in the ITV series Agatha Christie's Poirot from 1989 until June 2013



Peter Ustinov played Poirot six times

As Poirot first appeared as a character in 1920, the author assumes her readers will already know him and that there is no need for an introduction. Several of the characters on the train recognise him by fame or reputation. He is independently wealthy, has a great deal of freedom to travel (he has been in Europe satisfactorily solving a case at the start of *Murder on the Orient Express*) and he has no boss to whom he must account for his time and actions. As Christie had no idea how long she would have to keep writing about Poirot, she failed to 'age' him convincingly. If the reader tries to follow him chronologically through his cases and references to actual events, Poirot reaches the age of at least 105.



Although he makes a very brief appearance in the pages of the novel, Ratchett is also a major character, whose awful personality drives the plot. Agatha Christie goes to some pains to make him an especially unpleasant man who has a sense of evil hanging about him. Poirot thinks of Ratchett as “a wild animal”, his valet and his secretary dislike him, and nobody is sorry when he is killed. In contrast little Daisy Armstrong (the first name of ‘Daisy’ is deliberately chosen to evoke freshness and innocence) is a paragon of innocence and goodness. She is three years old when murdered, deprived of a chance at living a full life, pure and virtuous in her childish state. She becomes a symbol of Ratchett’s evil and it is seen as almost a duty of the Armstrong family to avenge her murder and prevent Ratchett from more such killings. For the ending of the novel to be accepted, Ratchett needs to be regarded by the reader as a thoroughly ghastly specimen of inhumanity.

It is typical of Christie that many of the secondary characters are stereotypical. You do not read her books for studies in psychology – Christie is a master of technique rather than style or characterisation. It has been said that her characters (with the exceptions of Poirot and Miss Marple) are not people but collections of characteristics, or puppets. They require no emotional involvement on the part of the reader. We do not grieve with them, or feel moved by them.

Murder on the Orient Express is no exception in this regard. Colonel Arbuthnot is the classic upright English solidier, who struggles to show emotion, dislikes foreigners, and is very aware of his place in the class system. Mary Debenham is also very English – cool, competent and reserved. She is a spinster governess, a type often to be found in Christie’s novels, but she is also beautiful and



The cast of the 1974 movie adaptation included Lauren Bacall, Ingrid Bergman, Jacqueline Bisset, Sean Connery, Albert Finney, John Gielgud, Anthony Perkins, Vanessa Redgrave, Rachel Roberts, Richard Widmark and Michael York.

wants to be loved. It was her cool intelligence that was principally behind the murder and she is Poirot's most skilled adversary when it comes to all the interviews he conducts.

Then there are the foreign characters such as Antonio. He is an embodiment of the English stereotype of an Italian – over talkative, emotional and easily moved to tears. He is suspect because Monsieur Bouc is convinced that 'Italians like to stab people'. The Greek Doctor Constantine hardly comes alive as a character, but confirms to the English prejudice by being a philanderer – he often daydreams of his mistress.

The Count and Countess are rather mysterious Russian aristocrats, the Princess is ugly (she looks like a toad) and rich and inspires great loyalty in her servants, the Swedish lady Greta is also over-emotional and "weeps and weeps", while the maid Hildegard Schmidt seems to be the archetypal placid, almost bovine, German. In contrast to the emotional Europeans, the reader meets several Americans. They too conform to the stereotypes of the era – they are loud and flamboyant, flashing their money around. Cyrus Hardman is slangy in his speech, ignores class barriers, and seems to be employed as a private detective (then seen as a very American occupation). Hector McQueen is frankly spoken and independent. Mrs Hubbard is disruptive and talkative.

Christie is good with individualised speech for the cast of characters – Princess Dragomiroff speaks with stately precision ("I directed the conductor to make up my bed whilst I was in the dining car ..."), while American Mr Hardman speaks in a slangy way ("Put me wise."). The characters in the book are strictly divided into categories – working class / aristocratic, British / foreign. Class was hugely important in the 1930s and Christie depicts a great difference between those who work for a living and those who don't. The characters who work get far more upset during the story – if



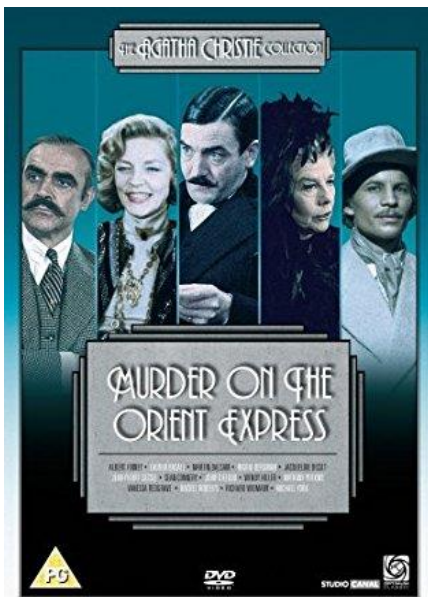
The cast of the 2017 movie adaptation included Kenneth Branagh, Olivia Colman, Penélope Cruz, Willem Dafoe, Judi Dench, Johnny Depp, Josh Gad, Derek Jacobi, Michelle Pfeiffer and Daisy Ridley.

they lose their jobs, they are seriously at risk. Mary Debenham has not told people she was associated with the Armstrong family in case it reduces her chance of employment. Valets and secretaries do not ask questions of their employers in case they lose their jobs.

It is important that most of the characters are not quite what they seem. Poirot has to check labels on suitcases, passports, luggage and backgrounds, in order to work out who the characters really are. He uncovers that Mrs Hubbard was the famous actress Linda Arden (her acting skills mean that the characters do, literally, get away with murder, as she is the one who moves Poirot by her explanation at the end), that Hildegarde was a cook and not a maid, that the conductor Pierre Michel's daughter was nursemaid who threw herself out of the window when accused of connection with the Armstrong kidnapping case, and that Countess Andrenyi is called Helena, not Elena. Detective stories are all about uncovering the truth, and it is the truth of identity that Poirot must discover in this novel. He must get beneath the stereotypes to find out who these people really are.

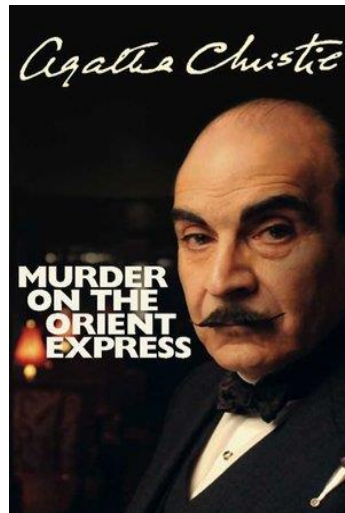
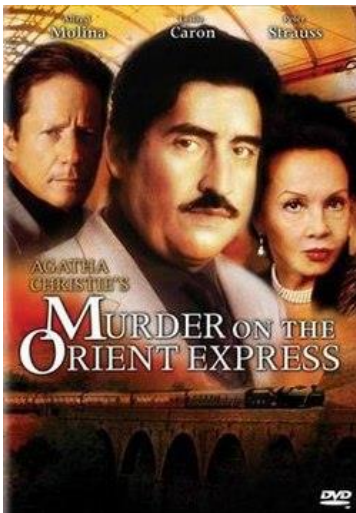
“And most conveniently she leaves her handkerchief behind!” said Poirot. “Exactly as it happens in the books and on the films—and to make things even easier for us it is marked with an initial.”

Film Versions



Murder on the Orient Express was first filmed in 1974 by EMI, with Albert Finney as Poirot. The cast of suspects included actors Sean Connery, Lauren Bacall, John Gielgud, Wendy Hiller, Vanessa Redgrave, Michael York, Ingrid Bergman and Jacqueline Bisset. Agatha Christie had been disappointed with film versions of her novels and was reluctant to allow any more movie versions to be made. It took the intervention of Lord Louis Mountbatten to convince her to take one more chance. Fortunately, the film was a popular and critical success and is today regarded as one of the best film adaptations of Christie's work. It received six Academy Award nominations and Ingrid Bergman won the award for Best Supporting Actress. Some interior filming was done in studios, but real Orient Express cars were used, and many of the exterior shots were filmed in France. The train's original dining car, which was used in the

filming, is on display in the OSE Museum in Thessalonica. Agatha Christie attended the film premiere (one of her last public appearances) and thought that Albert Finney was a convincing Poirot, though she did complain that his moustache was not luxuriant enough.



In 2001 there was a 100-minute made-for-television adaptation, with Alfred Molina as Poirot. This version was thoroughly modernised (it was set in the 1970s) and some changes were made, eg the train is stopped by a rockslide instead of snow drifts. In spite of a cast including Leslie Caron and Meredith Baxter, it was criticised for lacking depth and was not well regarded. Molina was seen as a rather stodgy Poirot.

In 2010 David Suchet acted Poirot in a TV adaptation produced by ITV. The cast includes Dame Eileen Atkins, Hugh Bonneville, Jessica Chastain and David Morrissey. It was a darker version than previous ones and the ending was greatly altered from that in the novel. When David Suchet was originally given the role of Poirot in 1989, he and his wife Sheila celebrated by taking a trip on the Orient Express. It would be twenty-one years later, with sixty-four films of Christie novels and stories, that Suchet finally got the rights to film this novel. Suchet has described this film version as exciting and disturbing” and it is clear that this Poirot is very disturbed by the idea of vigilante justice and plans to go to the police and reveal all.

A new film version was made in 2017, directed by Kenneth Branagh who also starred as Poirot. The cast include Dame Judi Dench, Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Penelope Cruz, Sir Derek Jacobi, Olivia Colman, and Willem Dafoe. Filming was done in the UK and the movie premiered at the Royal Albert Hall in London. It has been popular with the public but is not considered a great critical success.

There has also been a 2015 Japanese television version, and a ‘Poirot and click’ computer game which uses the voice of David Suchet.

David Suchet narrates a fascinating one-hour documentary on the life and works of Agatha Christie. I can recommend it and you can find it here: <https://youtu.be/VUmbf2fMF5M>

There are several audiobook versions available, narrated by Kenneth Branagh and David Suchet. You can locate them by searching Audible: <https://www.audible.com.au>

“Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will, your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul, is revealed by your actions.”

Discussion Questions

- 1) Do you like Monsieur Poirot? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 2) This is one of the very few Christie novels where the criminal is *not* brought to justice. Poirot is a very moral man and he follows the law, but in this novel it is a 'moral law' he submits to, and he lets the real murderers go. Do you think he is right to do this?
- 3) What clues is the reader given as to the true identity of Mrs Hubbard as an actress?
- 4) Agatha Christie is renowned for creating stock characters. Did you feel emotionally connected with any of the characters in this book?
- 5) Agatha Christie felt that about 50,000 words was the perfect length for a novel. Is this book just the right length? Discuss her structure and writing style.
- 6) Have you seen the new film version of the novel? If so, what did you think of it? How does it compare with any of the other film versions you have seen?
- 7) Agatha Christie has long been known as the 'Queen of Crime'. In your view does she deserve this title? Are there any other contenders for the position?
- 8) Why do you think murder mysteries are so popular? What is it that makes them satisfying to the reader?

Suggested Reading

Agatha Christie: A Biography by Janet Morgan
Agatha Christie: An English Mystery by Laura Thompson
Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime by H.R.F. Keating
Agatha Christie: An Autobiography by Agatha Christie
Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? by Pierre Bayard
Agatha Christie at Home, Hilary Macaskill

Links for further reading, videos, and more about Agatha Christie & *Murder on the Orient Express*:

<https://susannahfullerton.com.au/book-of-the-month/>

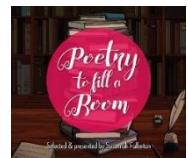
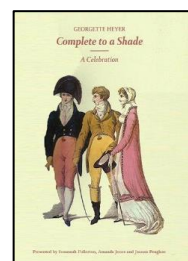
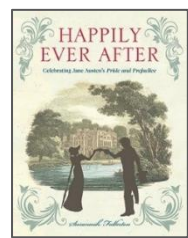
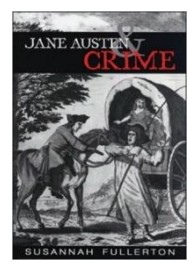
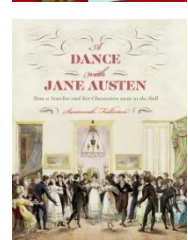
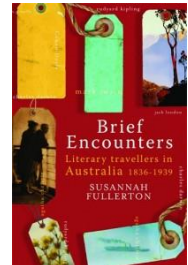
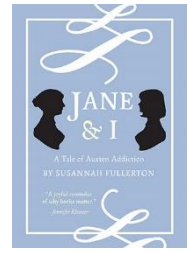
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Jane & I: A Tale of Austen Addiction

Brief Encounters: Literary Travellers in Australia 1836-1939

A Dance with Jane Austen

Jane Austen and Crime

Happily Ever After: Celebrating Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

Georgette Heyer: Complete to a Shade

Finding Katherine Mansfield – Audio CD

Poetry to Fill a Room – Audio CD

"Thanks, Susannah, for your lovely newsletter, it just gets better and better each time! I've read it all and clicked on every link. I recommend it to all my literature-crazy friends and look forward to the next and the next and the next."

Marisa C.