AGATHA CHRISTIE®
POIROT

THE GREATEST DETECTIVE IN THE WORLD

Mark Aldridge

HarperCollins*Publishers*

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Although arranged chronologically, this book is designed so that you may read it however you choose – whether from cover to cover, or by dipping into sections that you particularly want to find out more about (or, indeed, skip sections that you are less interested in). There are no major spoilers in the main text, although a handful are in the endnotes (and clearly signposted as such).

FOREWORD

What is required, of course, is *order*.

Order is paramount. Order is a good and beautiful thing. Order is what the little Belgian prizes above all things. But order is a hard thing to come by when assembling memories. What, you may ask yourself (standing in the metaphorical witness box of one of those tiresome trials which he himself never seemed to attend), was your first encounter with M. Hercule Poirot? A thrilling childhood viewing of *And Then There Were None* and the Margaret Rutherford Miss Marple films had taught me that Christie was very much up my street, but it was on foreign holidays (where Christie still seems to belong) that I first properly engaged with the little man with the egg-shaped head. The Mallorcan apartment we'd rented, you see, had the *lot* – a whole shelf of Christies with those incredibly scary Tom Adams covers and the strange, mustardy coloured pages of the foreign edition. *The ABC Murders*. *Death on the Nile*. *Five Little Pigs*. *Hallowe'en Party*. I can still remember one sultry Spanish evening, breathlessly explaining the plot of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to my slightly bemused parents as we trudged home from the local tapas bar. Indiscriminately, I devoured them (the books, not my parents). There was no order, you see! No way of appreciating the incredible run of copper-bottomed classics that Christie produced in what was a genuine golden age of crime writing. Which is why it's so pleasing to see each novel given a (spoiler-free) synopsis in Mark Aldridge's delightful, detailed and compulsively readable history of the great detective. And also to see the pleasingly gushing reviews from the papers of the time (*The Observer*'s crossword-compiler 'Torquemada' is a particular

delight). It's thus possible to see Agatha Christie grow from a popular but easily dismissed sausage-machine into a national treasure.

But just who *is* Hercule Poirot? Albert Finney's spluttering, sinister pug-in-a-hairnet Poirot? Peter Ustinov's clubbable, delightful, portly Poirot? David Suchet's avuncular, twinkling Poirot, his little grey cells owning many a childhood? John Moffatt on the radio? Austin Trevor? Charles Laughton? Kenneth Branagh? There have, you see, been an awful lot of Poirots, although, as Mark Aldridge demonstrates, few actually met with Dame Agatha's approval. Leading us by an infectiously learned hand, Mark travels all the way from Styles to Styles, from the detective's faltering beginnings right through to his creator's demise – and beyond. To the rich afterlife which has propelled Poirot into the front rank of fictional detectives and into one of the most beloved characters in popular culture. Mark's text is peppered with fascinating fragments from Christie's correspondence and that of her family. Her own sometimes crotchety response to publishers, editors and (most entertainingly) fans, as well as unpublished portions of her autobiography. There are wonderful blind alleys and curious near-misses all along the way. Did you know that Orson Welles played Poirot *and* Dr Sheppard? That there was a 1962 TV pilot in which Martin Gabel's Poirot watches TV in the back of his car? That Ronnie Barker played Poirot (straight) at the Oxford Playhouse? It's a feast for both the dyed-in-the-moustaches fan and the newcomer alike, a testament to a still-thriving industry born of sheer talent, hard work and what we would now call brand management. Mark brings order to a sometimes chaotic narrative, along the way nailing the unique, Sunday-night charm of the Suchet series and the reasons why the Ustinov *Evil under the Sun* is still the best time anyone can have in the cinema.

And though he mysteriously describes *Spice World – The Movie* as a 'classic comedy caper', he rightly dismisses the version of

Appointment with Death which I myself was in. Some crimes even Papa Poirot cannot forgive.

MARK GATISS
London. 2020

INTRODUCTION

Mes amis, we have cause for celebration. The great Hercule Poirot, the incomparable private detective, has now been entertaining us for a full century. Ever since *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, written by Agatha Christie during the First World War and first published in 1920, the reading public has keenly followed the Belgian detective's adventures as he investigated mysteries throughout the highs and lows of the following decades.[1] We have seen Poirot solve mysteries on trains, ships, and even a plane, with the results usually delivered to a warm critical and popular reception. He has solved cruel murders, uncovered international conspiracies, and found missing jewels for relieved owners. While doing this, he has sometimes been ably assisted by friends including Captain Hastings, Inspector Japp, his valet George, secretary Miss Lemon, and crime writer Ariadne Oliver – but it is always Poirot's own little grey cells that are needed to solve the crimes.

Some have tried to tell Poirot's life story by weaving together the scraps of information found in dozens of stories written across more than half a century, but any attempt to create a conclusive biography of the detective is a futile task. Many 'facts' are irreconcilable, and there are gaps and contradictions alongside extraordinary anti-ageing abilities. Even Christie often had to double check details of Poirot's life with her agent, and so it's no surprise that there are inconsistencies. Thankfully, this doesn't matter, because to make Poirot real would be to make him mundane and minimise his brilliance as a creation. This creative force, and the woman behind it, is what this book celebrates and explores.

Following the publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Agatha Christie's stories only grew in popularity before reaching a productive peak in the 1930s, a decade that saw a dozen novels starring Poirot, before the pace slowed a little, with the detective finally being retired by his creator in 1975's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*. Christie had actually prepared Poirot's swan song during the dark days of the Second World War, although she continued to place him in new stories for the next three decades, with this final manuscript designed to be published after her death. In the event, Christie would outlive her creation by a few months, as she died in January 1976. In total, she had created mysteries for Poirot to solve in thirty-three novels, dozens of short stories, and a handful of plays that would variously debut on the stage, radio and television. [2]

However, the story of Poirot does not end there. While Agatha Christie fiercely protected her creation throughout her life, by the 1970s there were signs that Poirot had the potential to become a mainstay of multiple media, with the big budget 1974 film adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* kickstarting a franchise of sorts. Later decades also saw a long running television series and one-off screen dramas, as well as faithful radio productions. But Poirot's reach has even moved beyond these traditional outlets for adaptations, as he has also appeared in almost every conceivable artistic form, from graphic novels to computer games and animations. Meanwhile, some of his lesser-known adventures have been uncovered and published to new audiences, and 2014 saw the first official original Poirot novel to be written by someone other than Christie, as Sophie Hannah took readers back to the golden age of detective fiction for what was to become the first in a series of new Poirot mysteries.[3] In short, Poirot has never really gone away, and is as popular as ever.

Any biography of Agatha Christie will show her to be a determined person. Born Agatha Miller in 1890, her early life is difficult to fathom for many of us in the twenty-first century,

especially with its (by modern standards) baffling interplay between wealth and poverty – she was part of a family with the trappings of the upper-middle classes, including servants and a beloved home, while they also appeared to teeter on the edge of destitution. Even the day-to-day events of Christie's life as a child feel like they are from such a distant age that it seems incredible that anyone experiencing them would still be working and publishing new material as late as the 1970s. Christie would later claim that she had 'a very lazy youth'. She recalled that her father, Frederick Miller, was 'a gentleman of substance who never did a hand's turn in his life – and a most agreeable man. I never went to school. I had nothing much to do but wander around the garden with a hoop, which was in turn a horse or ship, making up stories. It was a very happy and satisfying life; you did a certain amount of work but on the whole it was play all the time. Leisure is a great stimulant of the ideas. Boredom is a better one.'[4]

The creative stimulation provided by this boredom meant that Christie was no stranger to story writing as a child, especially when it was encouraged by her mother while young Agatha was suffering from the flu. 'I suppose I was trying things, like one does,' she later recalled. 'I first tried to write poetry. Then a gloomy play – about incest, I think ... some of the writing wasn't too bad but the whole thing was pretty poor.'[5] These stories included one called 'The House of Beauty', which she later claimed was 'the first thing I ever wrote that showed any sign of promise'.[6]

In around 1908 Christie completed her first novel, called *Snow Upon the Desert* ('I can't think why,' she claimed dismissively).[7] Although never published, the typescript still survives and offers an insight into the juvenilia of Christie, as she penned a lengthy story (at nearly 400 pages) concerning a group of people who are involved with the 'coming out' into society of young women in Cairo, just as Christie had done in 1907. While certainly overlength (this was likely the book she later referred to as 'a long, involved, morbid novel'), with a winding story of relationships between

vaguely connected characters, there are several smaller moments or turns of phrase that indicate Christie's growing talent, such as one character being described as 'as indiscreet as a babbling brook', while young dreamer Melancy Hamilton wishes for more when confronted with the mundanity of day to day life, as she complains about dull discussions of breakfast choices – 'eggs were so painfully prosaic', she thinks, before despairing 'That people could talk of *eggs* when there were blue skies and waters, and picturesque locals to watch'. Like a young Christie, Melancy fantasises about interesting lives and adventures, and we are told that 'to a discerning observer she expressed infinite possibilities'.

In *Snow Upon the Desert,* Melancy Hamilton has come to Cairo in the hope that it will help the deafness affecting her – initially she is only hard of hearing in a crowd, but with indecent haste she is completely deaf by the end of the first third of the book. It's probably telling that by the time Christie had finished writing this story she felt encumbered by this heroine of her own making, as she realised that her deafness made dialogue very difficult, and perhaps this character's enforced insularity also explains the book's propensity for rather overwritten meditations on characters' thought processes. In the end the author found a straightforward solution to her woes, as she granted Melancy a miraculous recovery of her hearing upon the character's return to England. We might see some parallels with Hercule Poirot himself here – another character whose traits she would come to dislike and felt restricted by. Could there even be a predecessor of this later difficult creation in *Snow Upon the Desert*'s brief description of 'a little foreign looking man' who lunches with some of the characters at one point? Certainly, we see forerunners of some other characters, most significantly in the two young lovers Tommy and Crocus, who decide to elope and then go on to solve a minor mystery in the final act. Their sparring relationship and gung-ho attitudes seem to mark them out as early versions of Tommy and Tuppence, the excitable investigators who meet in

Christie's second published novel, *The Secret Adversary*, and then marry.[8]

The typescript of *Snow Upon the Desert* was read by the novelist Eden Philpotts and the literary agency Hughes Massie, and both offered helpful advice, but it was not deemed good enough to publish. Nevertheless, Christie persevered with her writing when time allowed. Eventually, it was a bet with her sister, Madge, that paved the way for Poirot's debut. This bet, made in 1916, concerned the difficulty – or otherwise – of writing a mystery novel. 'At the time my sister and I used to argue a lot whether it was easy to write detective stories,' Christie later recalled. By this point, in the midst of the First World War, her life had inevitably moved on, and she was now working in a hospital dispensary to help the war effort having married Archibald Christie on Christmas Eve 1914, when she was twenty-four. The possibilities of writing her own piece of detective fiction clearly fired her imagination. 'It was never a definite bet,' Agatha Christie clarified in her autobiography. 'We never set out the terms – but the words had been said.' This is where Christie's determination would come to be so valuable. 'I thought perhaps now is the time for writing a detective story: I had a good idea going round about medicine. Then I had a holiday from hospital. Mother said "Why don't you go and stay on Dartmoor if you are going to write that book?" I think I spent three weeks in a hotel by myself, going for walks. I don't think I spoke to anyone and I managed to finish *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, I got it typed; I can't say I had high hopes. I started sending it to publishers. And it started coming back.'[9]

High hopes or not, the result of this bet would eventually transform Christie's life, and the world of detective fiction.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE 1920s

The period between the completion of Agatha Christie's first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, and its publication in book form was a frustratingly lengthy one for Christie. However, her tenacity in getting the book both completed and published would bode well for the challenges that she'd face during the 1920s, as she proved her skills as a writer of mysteries and thrillers time and again, which included a slew of Poirot short stories and five novels featuring the detective before the decade was out. For her first effort she'd written a murder mystery steeped in influences from her own reading of the genre, most particularly Sherlock Holmes, but presented the plot in such a way that it felt fresh and unpredictable while setting a template that she'd continue to offer twists on for more than half a century.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles
(Novel, 1921)

Set in 1916, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* concerns the inhabitants of the eponymous English country house, in which the wealthy matriarch Mrs Emily Inglethorp is murdered. Several family members, including her younger husband Alfred, are obvious suspects, but the accumulated evidence eventually presents a surprisingly complex picture. In the days when typescripts would be sent to prospective publishers in order of desirability (or likelihood of interest), the initial rejections meant slow progress as the companies held on to the story for months at a time. For a while she gave up hope, as she explained in an unpublished portion of her autobiography:

> I had really forgotten about it. In fact I had by that time written off *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* as being just as much as failure as the first novel I had tried to write [the unpublished *Snow Upon the Desert*]. It was no good, I evidently had not got the knack. Still I might try something else some day for fun if I had the time.[1]

Although she generally didn't lack perseverance, Christie had become busy with family life following the birth of her daughter Rosalind on 5 August 1919. Eventually, it was publishing house The Bodley Head that showed an interest, although by Christie's later recollection more than two years may have passed since she had sent it to them.[2] The Bodley Head's first reader's report had seen *Styles* as a potentially worthwhile commercial venture, despite feeling that it had 'manifest shortcomings'. The report claimed

that the book was an 'artificial affair', while the positives of characterisation and atmosphere were undone by a court-based denouement that was considered to be less dramatic and thrilling than it should be. The second reader's report echoed these concerns about the ending, which was felt to be improbable, but decided that publishing the novel was 'quite worth doing'. Christie was asked to change the final chapter for publication, which she did, and in doing so set the template for the lengthy reveal in the company of key characters and suspects by the detective in domestic surroundings that would become famous components of her novels, although this type of scenario actually occurred less often than many may assume.[3] One area that pleased the writers of both reports was the 'exuberant personality' of the 'jolly little man' who operated as the story's Sherlock Holmes and was identified as the novel's most original feature. The identity of this 'welcome variation' on the detective character was, of course, none other than Hercule Poirot.

It's no surprise that The Bodley Head noted similarities between the Poirot of *Styles* and the now familiar Sherlock Holmes. For one thing, the emphasis on seemingly innocuous details that have a greater significance – such as ash in the fire grate, or the arrangement of apparently ornamental items – echoes the approach to solving mysteries advocated by the original consulting detective. But perhaps more significantly, the relationship between the detective and his less accomplished assistant (and narrator) has particularly close parallels – if Poirot is this story's Holmes, then Hastings is most definitely its Watson. It's through the eyes of Arthur Hastings, our establishment figure as an invalided captain who is recuperating near to Styles, that we first meet one of the Belgian refugees who are finding refuge away from the war being waged across the channel:[4]

> Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His

> head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandyfied little man who, I was sorry to see, now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a detective, his flair had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by unravelling some of the most baffling cases of the day.

This description of the odd-looking little Belgian would be solidified and repeated over the next five decades and more, and while events changed around him – characters, locales, even wars – he stayed fixed (mostly, at least – the mysterious limp is soon healed). Christie later felt exasperated when asked to clarify the physical details of Poirot, but recalled that she twice saw people who fitted the description. In a draft discussion of Poirot and his cases penned for a newspaper serialisation in 1938 she pondered:

> Anyway, what is an egg-shaped head? Have I ever seen an egg-shaped head? When people say to me 'Which way up is this egg?' do I really know? I don't because I never do see pictorial images clearly – but nevertheless I know that he has an egg-shaped head – covered with black, singularly black, hair – and I know his eyes occasionally shine with a strange light – and twice in my life I have actually seen him – once on a boat going to the Canary Islands – and once having lunch at the Savoy – and I have said to myself 'Now if you had only the nerve you could have snapshotted the man on the boat and then when people have said 'Yes, but what is he like?' I could have produced the snapshot and said 'This is what he is like' and in the Savoy perhaps I could have gone to the man and explained the matter. But life is full of lost opportunities.[5]

In her autobiography, Christie remembered Poirot's creation in terms of necessity – she needed a detective for her story, but also needed one unlike those that had gone before. Having dismissed the likes of a schoolboy investigator or a scientist, she found

inspiration in the Belgian refugees who had settled near to her home. 'People always think you have a real person starting you off, but it isn't the case,' she said later. 'Some characters are suggested to you by strangers you've never spoken to – you see someone at a picnic and make up stories about them like a child. I was worried about finding a detective for my first book, and we'd had Belgian refugees at the beginning of the war, so I thought that quite a good idea. But I didn't really know any.'[6]

Once the broad background of the detective had been settled, why not make this detective character a retired police officer, she reasoned. 'What a mistake there,' she later conceded, as Poirot must surely have been well over 100 by the time of his later cases.[7] Christie also decided to make him 'very neat – very orderly', before wondering 'Is this because I was a wildly untidy person myself?'[8] Certainly she saw some elements of Poirot's character as a reaction against her own personality. 'If you are doubly damned – first by acute shyness and secondly by only seeing the right thing to do or say twenty-four hours late what can you do? Only write about quick witted men and resourceful girls whose reactions are like greased lightning!'[9]

All that was left was to decide his name. Christie fancied that, like Sherlock Holmes and his brother Mycroft, the name should be a 'grand' one, and so she settled on the amusement of this small man being named Hercules. When a surname of Poirot was decided upon (Christie claimed not to remember how or why), Hercules didn't seem to fit, and so the Belgian sleuth was christened Hercule instead.[10] Just as Holmes had been an outsider due to his egotistical attitude and obsessions, so Poirot can never truly blend into the scenery; he stands out from his English contemporaries while his idiosyncrasies allow much of society to underestimate his powers of deduction. The Bodley Head's request to rework the courtroom setting of the ending to take place elsewhere would unwittingly reinforce this template of Poirot as an outsider. The original ending had the retired detective testifying in court at

length, describing his solution to the case, which effectively made him part of the traditional system of law and order, rather than set apart from it as a private individual. Conversely, the final version leaves the likes of Inspector Japp (also introduced in this first novel) with the more mundane tasks of ensuring that the law is upheld and the villain prosecuted; for Poirot, the simple satisfaction of piecing together the puzzle can now be the prize.

The plot of *Styles* balances interesting and plausible elements (the nature of the poisoning, for example, is effectively depicted – unsurprisingly, given Christie's familiarity with poisons from her wartime service in a dispensary) with first class misdirections and a vivid set of characters, alongside some less convincing elements that Christie would soon offer better examples of, such as a less than believable disguise and a highly unlikely disposal of key evidence. If the story sometimes requires an excessive suspension of disbelief then at least it happens infrequently and briefly, and the unconvincing elements soon fade away while the overarching story grips the reader as the puzzle pieces slot into place. Essentially, the novel is an exercise in distraction, as Christie works to keep the reader from looking too closely at some suspects and events by employing a layer of obfuscation from multiple characters and with a highly satisfying double bluff at its centre. Compared to her later novels, these distractions are overly complicated, as Christie seems to signify a slight lack of confidence in her technique by throwing in so many clues and red herrings that the reader would have to be very astute indeed to ignore them all and tread the correct path to the solution. The result is a busy mystery that shines because of the overall impression it leaves once the author shows her hand at the end.

As was common during this era, the first appearance of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in print was as a newspaper serialisation rather than as a novel. In this case, Christie was paid £25 for the rights for the story to appear in *The Times*'s 'Colonial Edition', also known as *The Weekly Times*, between February and June 1920. By

October 1920 the book was finally published as a novel in America, but not yet in Britain, which prompted Christie to write a letter to her publishers that dispensed with niceties and opened with a simple question: 'What about my book? I am beginning to wonder if it is ever coming out'.[11] It's worth bearing in mind that at this point a year had passed since the positive reader reports, and the wartime events of the story were threatening to make it feel like a period piece by the time it was available in bookshops. Meanwhile, Christie had gone into battle with The Bodley Head over a single detail, the spelling of the word 'cocoa'. Christie correctly insisted on the final 'a', but (to use Christie's own description) the 'dragon' at the publisher who oversaw such details insisted that 'coco' was correct. The debate might seem innocuous, but the memory of the incident was strong enough that Christie remembered it for her autobiography decades later. This seems to have been something of a turning point in the relationship between author and publisher – whereas Christie had earlier assumed that The Bodley Head would know best, she now knew that not to be true. 'I was not a good speller, I am still not a good speller, but at any rate I could spell cocoa the proper way,' she explained in her autobiography. 'What I was, though, was a weak character. It was my first book – and I thought they must know better than I did.'[12]

Despite requesting pre-Christmas publication, it wasn't until 21 January 1921 that the novel was made available in Christie's own country, with the requested dedication to her mother, and a cover depicting characters in candlelight that Christie approved of, calling it 'artistic and "mysterious"!'[13] The novel was well received, with *The Church Times* saying that 'the book held the attention well', while commending the first-time author for offering a surprising solution that the reader had not worked out beforehand. 'Looking back, knowing the solution, it is possible to point to a good many faults,' the review also claimed, but 'a book of this type must be judged on the first reading.'[14] *The Times*

Literary Supplement received the book even more warmly, with the reviewer writing that 'The only fault in his book is that it is almost too ingenious ... In spite of its intricacy, the story is very clearly and brightly told.' Referring to the bet between Christie and her sister regarding the writing of a satisfying mystery, the review judged that 'Every reader must admit that the bet was won.'[15]

Almost five years after it had been written, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* had finally found an audience, quickly selling out of its initial run of 2,000 copies. Agatha Christie had continued her writing in the meantime – having signed a six-book contract with The Bodley Head, she had 'nearly finished a second one' by the end of 1920. This second novel, *The Secret Adversary*, was published in 1922, but it didn't feature any characters from her first book. However, for her third novel Christie brought the Belgian detective with the egg-shaped head with her, ready to solve an even more complex case, having established a style of mystery writing that her publishers were keen to see repeated. 'So I went on writing detective stories,' she later said. 'I found I couldn't get out.'[16]

The Murder on the Links
(Novel, 1923)

While Arthur Conan Doyle had been the clearest influence on *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* it was another mystery writer, Gaston Leroux, who Christie claimed had had the biggest impact on the second Poirot novel, *The Murder on the Links*. Christie had enjoyed Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, a locked-room mystery that had been first published as a novel in 1908 – in fact, she once claimed that it was the only mystery she'd read prior to *Styles*, apart from Sherlock Holmes. Regarding such influences, Christie later conceded that 'When one starts writing, one is most influenced by the last person one has read or enjoyed'.[17] Her interest in Leroux's style and story was combined with the influence of a real-life case in France in which the wealthy inhabitants of a house were attacked by an apparently random gang robbery, only for facts to emerge later that turn the story on its head, although in later years she felt that Leroux's novel 'reads rather peculiarly now'.[18] It may also be that Christie misremembered the influence of *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* on *The Murder on the Links* as, aside from the French setting and the use of rival detectives, Leroux's mystery has rather more in common with *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.[19] In an unpublished portion of her autobiography she ponders on a more straightforward reason for Poirot's new locale: 'I suppose I had been reading a lot of French detective stories lately, and it seemed to be rather fun to have one over there.'[20]