

# A Portrait of Agatha Christie

by Julian Symons

(excerpt from the foreword to  
*The Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie*)

When Agatha Christie died in January 1976, she was undoubtedly the most famous detective story writer in the world. In Britain alone, all of her most popular titles sold in the millions; in the United States, they were almost equally successful; and in every European country, her name was a household word. Her fame even extended to the heart of the Soviet bloc: editions of some of her books published in Moscow sold out immediately.

The personality behind the creation of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple was that of a shy and in most ways very conventional middle-class English lady. Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born in the Devonshire seaside resort of Torquay in 1890, the third child of a well-to-do American father and a mother who was markedly sensitive and aesthetically perceptive.

There was nothing unusual about Agatha Miller's childhood, except that she never went to school. She was taught at home by her mother, and at times by governesses, and evolved elaborate games that she played by herself, games in which one can perhaps see the germ of the intricate plots she evolved in later years. In adolescence, like other young girls of her class and time, she went to dances (never unaccompanied, because "you did not go to a dance alone with a young man"). She flirted, had proposals, and in 1914 married dashing Archie Christie, who became one of the first pilots in the Royal Flying Corps during World War I.

Agatha worked in a hospital and eventually found herself an assistant in the dispensary. There she conceived the idea of writing a detective story, something she had been challenged to do a year or two earlier by her elder sister, Madge. Since she was surrounded by poisons, what more natural than that this should be a poisoning case? What kind



## STUDY GUIDE

of plot should it be? "The whole point of a good detective story was that it must be somebody obvious but at the same time, for some reason, you would then find that it was not obvious, that he could not possibly have done it." Readers of her first detective story, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, will remember that this is just what happens in the book.

Then there must be a detective. What should he be like? She was devoted to Sherlock Holmes, but recognised that she must produce a character outside the Holmes pattern. What kind of person? Then she remembered a colony of Belgian refugees who had come to her part of Devon at the beginning of the war. Why not make her man a retired Belgian police officers? He would be meticulous, a tidy little man, always neat and orderly, with a slight flavour of absurdity about him. . . . Such was the birth of Hercule Poirot. He was to reappear in more than 40 other novels and short stories throughout Christie's career.

One of the decisive events in her life was the publication of that first detective story. Another, six years later, was her disappearance for several days. Her car had been abandoned, and the police treated the case as one in which her violent death could not be ruled out. After a nationwide police hunt she was found in a hotel at the spa of Harrogate,

in the north of England. It was immediately suggested that the disappearance had been a publicity stunt. In any case, she divorced her husband shortly thereafter and returned to her prolific career in writing.

For two or three years she was deeply unhappy. Then she met somebody at a dinner party who talked to her about the entrancing quality of the archeological finds recently made at Ur in Mesopotamia. She hurriedly booked a ticket on the Orient Express, which went at that time all the way from England. . . .

The trip was eventful. She was delighted by the beauty of Ur, and met a young man named Max Mallowan, assistant in charge of the expedition—it was when they were stranded in the desert for hours and she made no fuss about it that he decided to propose marriage. They were married in 1930, and in spite of the fact that he was fourteen years her junior, they lived happily ever after. She accompanied him on archeological digs, and these too provided the background for stories. Max Mallowan became one of the most distinguished figures in his field. In 1968 he was knighted, and three years later Agatha achieved the prime honour possible to a woman in Britain, when she was made a D.B.E., a Dame of the British Empire.

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INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE



# BLACK COFFEE

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A stormy winter night. An impeccably furnished English country house. Sparkling 1930's evening wear worn by variously suspicious characters. The lights go out. When they are restored, one of the party is found dead. Anyone who has read an Agatha Christie story or seen one of her tales adapted for film or the stage will recognize these eerie circumstances as those created by the master of the thriller genre herself. During the holiday season, IRT will present its third Agatha Christie stage mystery in its 18-year history: *Ten Little Indians* (1979), *The Mousetrap* (1986) and now *Black Coffee*.

*Black Coffee*, written in 1930, was Christie's first attempt at playwriting. Her master sleuth, Hercule Poirot, figures prominently in the play and of course, unravels the mystery in his inimitable style in the split second before he is to be killed himself. Other familiar characters from Christie's work included in the play are Poirot's trusty sidekick, Hastings, and Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard.

The basis of the mystery has an ironically historical context: the owner of the house in which the mystery takes place, Sir Claud Amory, is a scientist, engaged in atomic research. He has just discovered the formula for a substance he calls Amorite, which sounds strangely like a forerunner of nuclear fission: "its force is such that where we have hitherto killed by thousands, we can now kill by hundreds of thousands." The mystery stems from the theft of this formula, and the motives that each member of the household could have for stealing it. Could it be Sir Claud's financially-indebted sister Caroline, doomed to a life of caring for her famous brother? Could it be Sir Claud's orphaned niece Barbara, whose capricious spending habits have caused her uncle to close the purse strings? Could it be Sir Claud's trusted assistant Raynor, the omnipresent butler, Tredwell, or the Italian ladies maid, Gabrielle? Or could it be Sir Claud's son Richard, whose political aspirations are thwarted by his father's career plans for him? Or Richard's exotic Italian wife, Lucia, from whose shadowy past emerges yet another suspect, the unexpected guest, Dr. Carelli? With her usual panache, Dame Agatha has gathered an enticing collection of suspects which make for fabulous stage characterizations.

Excerpt from

## There'll Always be an England

by Martha Grimes (American author of the Superintendent Jury crime novels)

In a wonderful Monty Python routine, the cast is cloistered in an English manor house. The subject is murder. Could there be any other in an English manor house? Everything else—tea, port, chat, crackling logs—is subordinate to the murder and to the entrance of the Inspector Hound. . . .

We who love to read such books can muster up many simi-

lar cliches of the English thriller genre: the library (where the characters go not to read, but to die); the unquenchable thirst for tea and/or port (with nasty things in their dregs); dim outlines in the fog (that are seldom those of friends); riding to hounds on frosty mornings (where something rather untoward waits on the other side of the boxhedge); valets or butlers being unspeakably subservient (because they are unspeakably disguised). In addition to all of the above, the suspects (meaning one's relations) always seem to be wearing tennis togs or black tie and chalking their cue-sticks.

Perhaps the primary convention of the British thriller is the chicken-coop quality. It is claustrophobic. There are certain places where the suspects are invariably found: in

the manor house or the parsonage. . . . It is uncanny the way the reader doesn't actually see anyone work or anyone outside.

Even when the characters are outside, they might just as well have stayed at home. I cannot remember a suspect ever actually walking along Oxford or Regent Streets (unless it is dead dark). . . . One sometimes gets the impression that all the characters are incipient agoraphobes who hug their libraries and drawing rooms to them for security's sake (only to get murdered in them finally). They talk about going up to town, popping in to Harrod's, catching the earliest train—endlessly, endlessly—but one doesn't see them actually walking up and down the aisles of an actual train. In the British thriller, claustrophobia is honed to a fine art.

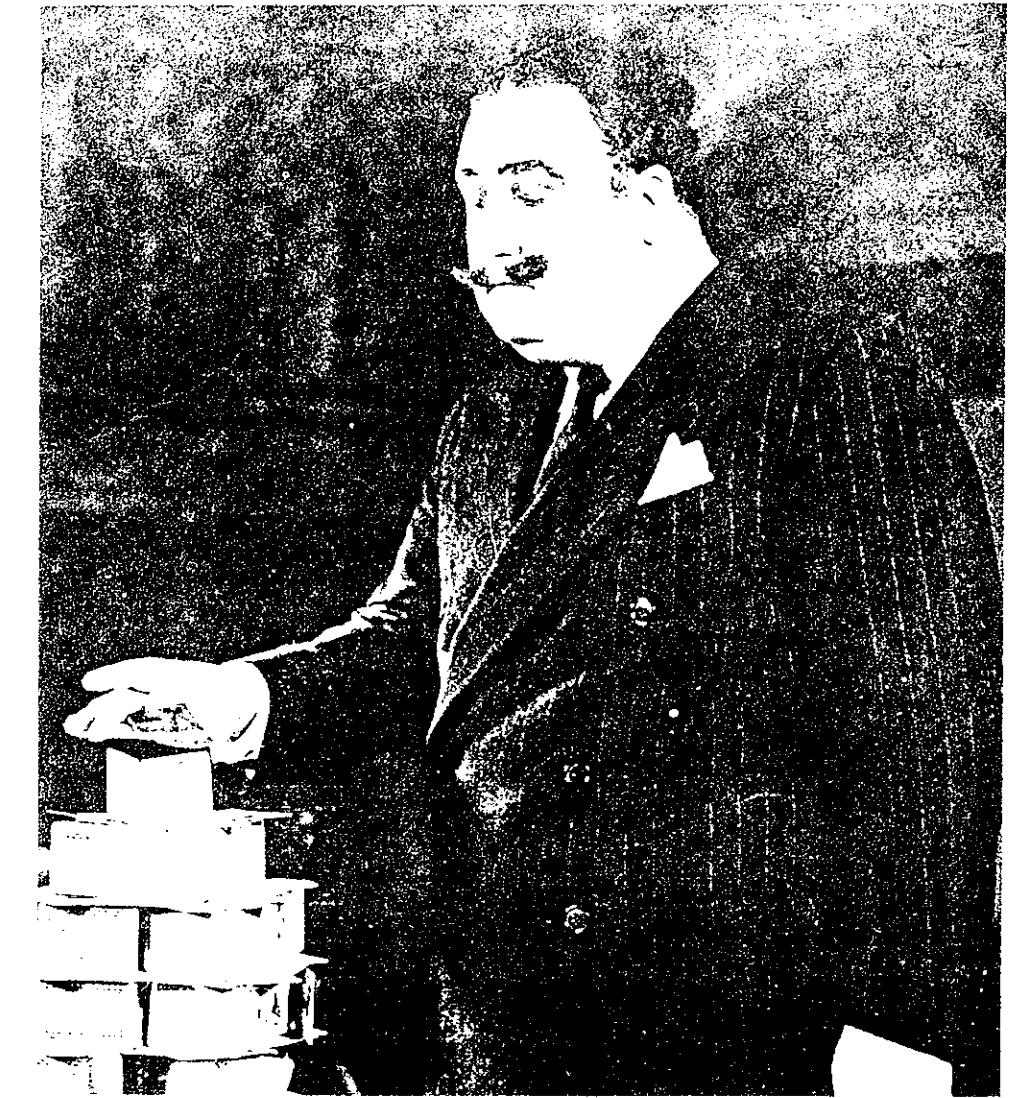
## Hercule Poirot: A Portrait

Every so often, a literary historian feels obliged to determine the best known English-speaking fictional characters: a recent survey placed Tarzan of the Apes at the top of this list, with Sherlock Holmes ranking second. But very near the top of this same list was another sleuth: an egotistical Belgian one who delighted in the capacity of his "little grey cells"—none other than Agatha Christie's armchair detective, Hercule Poirot.

Poirot is famed for several characteristics, both cerebral and physical. He is described very specifically in Christie's books by his demeanor and attire: small stature, "toniced" black hair, pomaded mustache, twinkling eyes, immaculate, formal dress, extravagant gestures. Yet actors of all physical types have played Poirot, suggesting that the character is embodied in a style and attitude, rather than in the specifics of Christie's description: Charles Laughton was the first stage Poirot, Frank L. Sullivan portrayed Poirot many times, and in more recent memory, Peter Ustinov, James Coco and Albert Finney have all assayed the role of the correct Belgian sleuth.

Poirot's linguistic mannerisms are the source of affection for many of Christie's readers: being a Belgian by birth, Poirot's native tongue was French, so he sprinkles his English with French colloquialisms and expletives. These verbal mannerisms made people look upon him as a foreigner, and Poirot's foreignness was generally an asset to him in finding the murderer: he could listen at keyholes and read other people's mail without becoming odious, things which no decent Englishman would do.

Poirot's cerebral characteristics are legendary to Christie aficionados: his mania for order and symmetry are highest on the list of personal nuances. His worshipful attention to detail



Francis L. Sullivan as Poirot in the 1940 film *Peril at End House*

has led to more than one solution to a crime: his automatic habit of straightening other people's mantelpieces and drawers led him to the murderer on several occasions.

It was this precision of the brain that was at the core of his investigative style. That meant, above all, once the facts of a case were fully in hand so far as known, use of the "little grey cells" became his deductive method. The great mistake for the detective, as Poirot never tired of explaining, was to try to make the clues fit the interpretation. No, the mind of the detective must be sufficiently clear and orderly to arrive at

the explanation that accounts for all the evidence. And for Poirot a great part of the detective work was sitting quietly and thinking, until the mind had reached that understanding.

Over many years of Agatha Christie's writing, Poirot has come to represent wisdom, experience and the tolerance which comes with age. Poirot stands for tradition, for order and method for its own sake. In a world beset with confusion, disagreement, and strife, he is always calm and collected, and reassures us that reason can resolve any problem or complexity.

Janet Allen

## **The Ten Rules for Writing Detective Fiction**

(as developed by Britain's Detective Club)

### **one**

The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story,

but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.

### **two**

All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.

### **three**

Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.

### **four**

No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.

### **five**

No Chinaman must figure in the story.

### **six**

No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.

### **seven**

The detective must not himself commit the crime.

### **eight**

The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.

### **nine**

The friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind;

his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.

### **ten**

Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

## **A Vocabulary Guide to the Thriller**

(especially Black Coffee)

For me the fascination of mystery stories is that of the beckoning unknown. I am seduced by suspense. In fiction as in life, I am lured on by eagerness to find out what is going to happen in the next chapter, or the next scene—and, in the end, whodunnit.

Elliot L. Richardson

**Alias:** several people in any given mystery seem to possess them—an assumed name employed for its disguise purposes. In Christie's stories, foreigners are commonly suspected of operating under an alias. Who might this mean in Black Coffee?

**Little Gray Cells:** Poirot's favorite part of his anatomy, his brain cells, of which humans possess approximately one trillion. The cells are indeed grey, but they are also white—which Poirot fails to mention—and when seen through a microscope they have a brownish tinge. Doctors call them neurons, or nerve cells.

**Modus Operandi:** the killer's plan for doing away with his victim; that is, through what means will the victim be killed (poison, shooting, drowning, etc.), and how will the cover-up allow the murderer to escape detection. Usually detectives work backward from establishing motive, and motive in Christie's tales is invariably greed. Most of her characters are gold-diggers of some proportion.

**Lucrezia Borgia:** 16th-century

Italian murderess famed for her gem rings which concealed secret compartments of poison.

**The "Locked Room" Mystery:** the genre which Black Coffee belongs to which reduces the detective's field of investigation to the one room in which the murder took place. Exciting because it seems to involve magic, and many clues are laid simply to deceive.

**The Gothic House:** famed location for murder mysteries, these manor houses are usually in an out-of-the-way location, not far from London, and usually cut off from civilization by inclement weather of some sort. They often feature hidden doors or passages, ghosts, and endless off-stage halls which lead nowhere. Frequently they contain something innately mysterious about their decoration or somber atmosphere: rooms that one fears to be in in the dark.

**Red Herrings:** They are false clues meant to distract one from the real villain. The term originated in England where, in the 17th century, herrings were dragged through hunting fields to throw the hunting dogs off the scent, thus allowing the fox to escape. Thus did red herrings become synonymous with attempts to deceive.

**Hyoscine:** C17H21O4N: an alkaloid that affects the central nervous system by interfering with nerve impulses and causes delirium, delusions, paralysis, stupor and finally death. Poison of choice in Black Coffee.

## **Agatha Christie Continued from front page**

By the time of her death she had produced more than eighty crime stories, along with half a dozen romance novels under the name Mary Westmacott, several plays (including the longest-running play in history, *The Mousetrap*) and two volumes of autobiography. In the 1960's and 70's Christie became best known for her movie mysteries: *Murder of the Orient Express*, *Murder on the Nile* and *Evil Under the Sun*.

What is the basis of her

lasting attraction? In the years before her death she was rightly acknowledged as the queen of the Golden Age detective story, the puzzle pure and complex. She never thought of herself as a great or even a good writer, but she was the master conjurer of our time. That conjurer's sleight of hand will keep her best work fresh and fascinating to each new generation as long as detective stories are enjoyed.