

As with Fleming and Bond, harsh comments were there in Christie's lifetime, notably from Edmund Wilson in 1944. In addition, later authors could be unsparing of Christie's type of fiction. In his denunciation of the genre, *Snobbery with Violence. English Crime Stories and their Audience* (1971), revised and reprinted in 1979, Colin Watson, himself an author of detective novels, devoted a chapter to Christie. It was far from one of his most critical, and offered some good points, not least that Poirot was acceptable because his foreignness was familiar. However, there is also criticism of both author and audience. The detective story is presented as playing an increasingly important part in the attempts by the middle class to maintain its status, and Christie as providing not the world of adventure and opulence offered by Phillips Oppenheim, Anthony Hope and William Le Queux, one of 'maître d'hôtel and millionaires' but, instead, 'familiar homeliness' and 'stock characters observing approved rules of behaviour according to station, and isolated utterly from all such anxieties and unpleasantness as were not responsive to religion, medicine and the law.'

This approach reflected a total failure to engage with the range of Christie's writing, but it was a commonplace view. Indeed, while subsequent changing presentation of her stories and plays throw a light on English culture, there were already contradictory views during her lifetime. Christie responded to criticism of this type in her *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) as she has Marple have to put up with being criticised by Raymond West for not leaving her 'idyllic rural life' in order to focus on real life. Marple considers this criticism very ignorant, as the facts of rural life were far from idyllic, while there was always something going on in St Mary Mead.

As with Watson, so also with Julian Symons in his *Penguin Classic Crime Omnibus* (1984), a work that reflected his general disdain for Golden Age fiction. This was pretty harsh on Christie: 'the never-never land of her imagination where it seems always to be tea-time in some Edwardian year. The colonels, doctors, lawyers and others who inhabit this world are no more real than Cluedo figures.'¹ The plots, settings and characterisation were certainly different to Symons' novels, but there were the shared artificiality and instrumentality of both genre and fiction.

P.D. James, in her *Talking about Detective Fiction* (2009), offered a more subtle account than Watson or Symons and in particular praised Marple 'who is not only unique in working entirely alone without the help of a Watson, but in being invariably cleverer than the police detectives she encounters.' However, I am more doubtful about her view that Golden Age novels were a genre of escape in which there is no real pity, empathy or sympathy, and, instead, a 'confident morality.'² I, instead, find less of confidence to match the certainty of the moral context, but, more particularly, a marked degree of complexity in some of the writings.

In *The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Books* (2018), a compendium of concise comprehensiveness, Martin Edwards focuses instead on an unprecedented skill in misdirection and consistency in ingenious whodunnits, while noting that her focus on a surprise solution took

precedence over other elements.³ Interestingly, Christie has served as an inspiration to others, such as Yukito Ayatsuji, author of the Japanese classic *The Decagon House Murders*. *And Then There Were None* was the chief influence, one victim is named after Christie, and the cast is of students, all fans of detective fiction, who staying on an island house get murdered.

Christie is also used as a way to present, and therefore sell, other titles. Thus, Lucy Foley's *The Guest List* (2020) is very much not a Christie in content or tone, but it comes with a back-cover recommendation 'A very modern Agatha Christie,' and with acclaim accordingly: 'Confirms her status as this generation's Agatha Christie' (*Sunday Express*) and 'Evoking the great Agatha Christie classics *And Then There Were None* and *Murder on the Orient Express...*' (*New York Times*). These comments are clearly regarded as praise.

Christie herself provided plentiful accounts of her writing, as well as an autobiography that, in the manner of the genre, explained as well as concealed. Thus, in her foreword to *The Body in the Library*, she captured a writing process as well as a degree of reticence:

'There are certain clichés belonging to certain types of fiction. The "bold bad baronet" for melodrama, the "body in the library" for the detective story. For several years I treasured up the possibility of a suitable "Variation on a well-known Theme."

That, indeed, was a characteristic of her writing. Although criticised for being a conventional writer, Christie repeatedly sought to push the envelope in offering variations. To a degree that was a matter of ingenuity, which can scarcely be underrated in a genre that deals with battles of wits, wills and circumstances, but Christie offered more because, as also with other writers, she was providing novels and not simply technique. For this novel, she noted:

'I laid down for myself certain conditions. The library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body. Such were the terms of the problem, but for some years they remained as such, represented only by a few lines of writing in an exercise book.'

Chance observation of a family in a hotel dining room provides the pivot of a character on which she can endow 'imaginings' for, she notes, she did not like to write about people she knew. She was more willing to use places. For example, Agatha's eccentric brother Monty was put out on Dartmoor for everyone's safety. Christie visited him often and described the village in *The Sittaford Mystery*. She closes the Foreword to *The Body in the Library* in a light tone: 'In the manner of a cookery recipe add the following ingredients: a tennis pro, a young dancer, an artist, a girl guide, a dance hostess, etc, and serve up *à la* Miss Marple!' This is detective fiction as entertainment and not simply a way to approach themes in cultural change and continuity.

So also with Christie's openness about the hard work that writing entails, an element she does not disguise. She added a foreword to *Crooked House* (1949) including:

‘this book is one of my own special favourites. I saved it up for years, thinking about it, working it out, saying to myself: “One day, when I’ve plenty of time, and want to really enjoy myself – I’ll begin it!” ... Again and again someone says to me: “*How* you must have enjoyed writing so and so!” This about a book that obstinately refused to come out the way you wished, whose characters are sticky, the plot needlessly involved, and the dialogue stilted – or so you think yourself... I don’t know what put the Leonides family into my head – they just came. Then, like Topsy “they growed.” I feel that I myself was only their scribe.’

In *Hallowe'en Party* (1969), Christie, in the person of Ariadne Oliver, provides some good hints on how she wrote, with reference to her imaginings about people she met, rather than those she knew. The latter, as she pointed out, constrained such imaginings.⁴

Technique will take you a long way in presenting Christie’s skill. To adopt the language of the military historian, it gives you both the tactical and the operational dimensions. However, there is no comparable grasp of the strategic perspective. That can be variously presented, with success appearing the major goal. Yet, throughout, there is a moral purpose. This is not one of some sectional politics, of a backing, for example, for Baldwinian Conservatism or a *Pax Britannica*. Instead, there is a continual struggle between Good and Evil, one that is present in every soul and in society as a whole. This helps to explain characterisation, dialogue and plots: there are deceptions and travails, but rightness is a shield as well as a goal. And, to that end, Christie provides the relevant tactical, operational and strategic devices and perspectives. The firm Christian theme she enunciated in the short story ‘The Call of Wings,’ published in *The Hound of Death*, is possibly the clearest instance, one of poetic intensity without the complications of a misdirection. Silas Hamer, a wealthy materialist, is made aware of meanings and purposes, and gains an epiphany and redemption accordingly. Whereas Christie’s Harley Quin stories to this end are somewhat everywhere, this call is very much set in London, and provides a powerful story.

Yet, alongside the continued sales of the published works, it is now the visual version that is to the fore. Christie has always been keen on that version but rather with a preference for the stage rather than film: she enjoyed the theatre but not the cinema, and some of her plays were impressive, notably *Witness for the Prosecution*. Television and cinema adaptations, of her plays and, even more, her novels, and short stories, faced the usual problems of such work. The more nuanced aspect of her writing suffered a diminution when adapted, especially for television, but that did not hurt its incredible popularity. There has been a quite conscious and deliberate reworking of many of her stories, a reworking that is increasingly that of tone rather than simply plot, notably the BBC serial adaptations by Sarah Phelps from 2015, especially *The ABC Murders* (2018) and *The Pale Horse* (2020). The reworking seeks to add Freudian overtones and also to refresh material with which the audience was assumed to be overly familiar. Ironically, the reworking also pays tribute to Christie’s significance. The contrasting approach would simply have been to bypass the plots far more

completely as in the recent television versions of the Sherlock Holmes stories. The need for an ingenious murder plot keeps Christie more central to the later versions than with Fleming and Bond. Both, however, continue for many to play a major role not only in national identity but also in their genre.

¹ J. Symons, *The Penguin Classic Crime Omnibus* (London, 1984), p. 80. See also Camilla Long review of Sarah Phelps, *The Pale Horse* in *Sunday Times*, 16 Feb 2020.

² James, *Talking About Detective Fiction* (Oxford, 2009), p. 66.

³ M. Edwards, *The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Books* (2018), pp. 48, 52.

⁴ *Hallow'en Party*, chapter 18.