

**Agatha Christie, Queen of crime
and her deadly dispensary of poison**

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“Surrounded by poisons I suppose it was natural I should use poison as the murderer’s weapon in my very first book,” said Agatha Christie about the start of her remarkable career. To lighten the dark subject of murder and poison we’ll look at how her beloved Devon inspired her writing. Her own life was as dramatic and eventful as her fiction. We’ll discover people, places and plants that inspired her to become the most popular crime writer of all time. We’ll look back at the tradition of crime writing of her time and also consider her legacy both local and global.



*Figure 1
Burgh Island Stamp*

In the best Agatha Christie tradition we start with a mystery. This Royal Mail postage stamp of Burgh Island was launched in 2016 to celebrate the centenary of Agatha Christie writing her first novel *“The Mysterious Affair at Styles”*. Jim Sutherland, one of the stamp designers, wanted them to reflect Christie’s consummate skill in confusing her readers.

Burgh Island was the inspiration for Agatha's all-time best seller "*And Then There Were None*" written in 1939. The island as shown is also a man's profile looking up to the sky; the little yellow hotel light is his eye. This conjures up the sinister presence of the murderer who invites guests to stay, strands them on the island only to kill them off one by one, sometimes violently, sometimes discreetly by poison.

By the time she died in 1976, she was the world's best selling crime writer. According to the Guinness Book of Records this is still true. Only outsold by the Bible and Shakespeare she wrote over a hundred books and plays in a career spanning more than fifty years. Sales of her works are four million annually. Two billion copies have been sold worldwide, translated into 130 languages.

In 1968 she was made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. She was unpretentious and modest, insisting she wanted her books to just entertain; a shy person, she shunned publicity. She was an expert in archeology and photography. She read and spoke excellent French.

In 1938 she purchased Greenway, her beloved holiday home on the river Dart in Devon. She became a passionate plants woman. She had a very fine singing voice and was an accomplished pianist. She volunteered to nurse in Torquay Hospital during the first World War and was swiftly promoted to the hospital dispensary.

"*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*" written in 1916 had a dramatic description of the symptoms of death by strychnine poisoning. It was praised for its accuracy by the "*Pharmaceutical Journal and Pharmacist*." A review that she cherished all her life. A hundred years later her use of science has been put under scrutiny again, this time by Professor of Toxicology Kathryn Harkup in her erudite and fascinating book "*A is for Arsenic*". Harkup's explanations of how the various poisons attack the body makes

beautiful science and scary reading.

Professor Harkup concludes that Christie's science was almost without exception, correct. She writes: "*Throughout her writing career Christie kept up to date with the safe and dangerous use of drugs. She collected articles about real live murder cases. Her notes showed she studied some of the more lurid murderers such as Crippen.*"

Christie's detailed descriptions of Thallium poisoning in "*The Pale Horse*" in 1961 were used by pathologists who were examining one of the victims killed by the real life serial killer Graham Young in 1962.

Her arsenal of poisons contains Arsenic, Belladonna, Curare Digitalis, Eserine, Hemlock, Monkshood, Nicotine, Opium, Phosphorus, Ricin, Strychnine and Veronal. "*A deadly dispensary*" indeed, as Professor Harkup termed it..

Let's start with the common foxglove. In "*Appointment with Death*", set on an archeological dig in Petra, the murderer was fortunate to be travelling with a doctor who had digitalis in his bag to treat the victim who was already suffering from a heart complaint. An extra dose proved lethal. This went unnoticed by all except Poirot.

Nearly all Christie's potent plants can be seen in Torre Abbey in Torquay. The head gardener Ali Marshal has created a beautiful potent plant garden inspired by Christie's use of poisons, all part of Christie's legacy in Devon.

Professor Harkup examines her use of arsenic, ricin and phosphorus.

Arsenic, "*The King of poison and poison of Kings*" only killed eight out of the more than 300 characters dispatched by Christie. It was already known in the time of Cleopatra. When she decided to kill herself it is said she tried various poisons on her slaves and watched the results. Arsenic was too unpleasant for Cleo, so she chose the asp. Arsenic was often a poisoner's first choice as

it has no taste. Symptoms of arsenic poisoning resemble food poisoning and dysentery. Arsenic was also the centre of great speculation about the death of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1821.

He suffered from severe stomach aches, and French and British accused the other of poisoning him. 140 years later analysis of a hair sample showed it had a higher than usual but non-fatal arsenic level. The wallpaper was the culprit, arsenic gas had been produced by the paste. He had also been given a tonic containing potassium arsenite.

In "*Murder is Easy*" victims are drowned, pushed under a bus, into a canal, out of a window and hit over the head, and of course, poisoned. Those victims had all complained to the doctor of severe recurrent stomach pains. In the end the killer confesses to having killed the unfortunate Mrs Horton by dissolving arsenic trioxide in a hot cup of tea.

She sought ever more devious and ingenious ways for her murderers to administer and conceal their choice of poison.

In "*The House of Lurking Death*" an extract from the castor oil plant, **ricin**, killed all the victims. There were castor oil plants in the garden. Miss Logan had many pinpricks on her arm. She claimed from a rose bush but that rose bush had no thorns. Miss Logan had been injecting herself with small doses of ricin so that when she offered a plate of ricin enriched fig sandwiches to all her guests she ate a little too. She became ill but survived and therefore was not a suspect. The parlour maid was not supposed to be a victim. She purloined a sandwich in the pantry. Her greed was indeed a deadly sin.

Some critics have said that Christie's use of poisons is often too contrived and unrealistic, but one of the most extraordinary modern assassinations ever took place in London in 1978. The Bulgarian defector George Markov was walking over Waterloo Bridge when a passerby thrust his umbrella at his leg. The tiny capsule later found in his leg was found by Porton Down to have

contained the fatal dose: Ricin.

In her first novel "*The Mysterious Affair at Styles*" the Inglethorpe family visit a local pharmacist friend. A bottle of strychnine is on the shelf. All the suspects are there and are able to steal it if they wished. Poirot finds strychnine in a drawer, purchased to put down a dog, as one could do in those days. It was also sold as pesticide. He finds strychnine in the tonic beside the victim's bed. In 1916 none of this was in itself unduly suspicious.

In "*The Dumb Witness*" the murderer chooses **phosphorus** as his murder weapon. Miss Arundell was taking liver pills in the form of gelatin capsules. It was easy for the murderer to empty the capsules and refill them with 100 mg of phosphorus. In those days phosphorus was easy to obtain as a rat poison.

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A break from murder now to explore what else inspired her. Born September 15, 1890 in Torquay she was the youngest of Frederick and Clara Miller's three children. She was schooled in her father's extensive library at her beloved home Ashfield. As a tourist guide with foreign groups I have seen first hand how Agatha's Christie's works are held in such high esteem abroad. Many teachers use her works to teach English conversation. Agatha Christie brings thousands of visitors to Devon. It often seems like a pilgrimage.

There is even a walk called the *Agatha Christie Mile*. A favourite spot on this walk is Beacon Cove. Agatha almost drowned here as a child. Later in her books she does not flinch from death by drowning but only uses it nine times.

When Christie was eleven her father died. His fortune in America was failing. Life at Ashfield had to be less lavish. Her father's death made her realise the necessity of money. Desire for money was to become a recurring motive for resorting to poison again!

At this stage in her life though she was a popular young woman mixing with the wealthiest families in Torquay, visiting their grand houses. Many similar houses were to appear in her books. Agatha had also been a guest on Burgh Island. The visit inspired her to write her best selling book of all time, published in 1939, "*Then There Were None*". With a hundred million copies sold to date it is now ranked the seventh best selling book of all time. She made a bet that no reader would be able to guess who successfully "bumped off" the ten victims. Burgh Island was also the inspiration for "*Evil under the Sun*".

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In 1914 Agatha and Archie were madly in love and at Christmas, she married the impetuous young flying officer in Saint Nicholas church partly visible now in Clifton College. Down in Torquay Agatha's mother had grave misgivings. They enjoyed one night's honeymoon in the elegant Grand Hotel in Torquay. Archie returned to the battlefields of Belgium the very next day. While he was away Agatha started her life long affair with poisons. She was also trying to create her own detective. She was a huge admirer of Sherlock Holmes but wanted her detective to be totally different to him.

The sad groups of Belgian refugees strolling around in Torquay provided her with the very man. She realised that among them must be doctors, nurses, teachers, policemen and why not... a private detective?

So her detective would be foreign, with a pronounced foreign accent in sharp contrast to the quintessentially English Sherlock. He was tall and slim. Hers would be short and portly. The name would be slightly humorous. Poirot sounds like the French for the vegetable leek. With his fastidiously waxed moustaches he was hardly Hercules. Hercule Poirot was born.

While studying for her Apothecary exams she met a pharmacist in Torquay who inspired her murder plots with unusual poisons.

She refers to the chemist as Mr. P. A disturbing character. He told her how he felt powerful by carrying a solid piece of curare, another deadly poison, around in his pocket. This may well have been the trigger for her interest in the more esoteric poisons.

In the final Poirot book "*Curtain*", Hastings' daughter is in love with a slightly obsessive scientist researching the Calabar bean. The scientist's wife is murdered. Hastings even believes his daughter could be suspect. A baffling plot finishes off Poirot. The local name for the bean was eséré. The same compound is also known as esserine and is used in the ophthalmic industry. Christie used it in "*The Crooked House*" to kill off a victim who was given his eye drops to drink.

In "*The Pale Horse*" the murderer uses thallium, a soft grey metal which is used in photography. A group of people interested in the occult meet in the Pale Horse pub. There is of course a murderer in their midst.

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In 1926 an event equally baffling and worthy of any of her own Whodunnits brought her international fame. Her disappearance on December 3rd caused the police to suspect her husband Archie Christie had murdered her. He was having an affair with a brunette called Nancy Neele. Agatha Christie's car had been found abandoned in an isolated spot in Surrey.

An enormous manhunt was launched with over 15,000 volunteers. Ten days later she was found in a hotel in Harrogate in Yorkshire. A statement was released saying she had suffered an attack of amnesia. She refused to ever speak of the incident again. This unexplained event may well have inspired several modern writers. "*Gone Girl*" by Gillian Flynn for example. It definitely inspired Andrew Wilson to write "*A Talent for Murder*". Published in May 2017 he takes her disappearance and creates a baffling scenario to explain her bizarre behaviour.

She wrote in that time often called the Golden Age of British detective fiction: 1920 -1945: The era of the locked room, the country house murder, the snow covered lawn with no footprints. Ingenuity reached new heights – the poison smeared postage stamp and the icicle dagger soon to melt into thin air. In 1944 a board game called Murder was invented to help pass the time in bombshelters. Waddingtons snapped it up and renamed it “Cluedo”.

By the outbreak of War Agatha Christie was a household name. Her books were the must-have reading material in the underground. They were soothing! Readers waited anxiously for her next book. She was dubbed the Queen of Crime, the Duchess of Death. In “*Lord Edgware Dies*” he is stabbed by a dagger in the library in true Colonel Mustard tradition. Some critics have called Christie formulaic, with her characters pushed around a Cluedo board. Not always.

The “*Murder of Roger Ackroyd*” written in 1926 caused a huge storm of critical accusations that Christie had cheated her readers. Despite this, it is still one of her best sellers. On a Radio 4 Book Club discussion it was held up as an example of the best crime fiction ever.

If Christie’s style is formulaic, it’s a winning formula with the enduring power of Miss Marple and Poirot. He was created in her very first book in 1916. Readers had to wait till 1932 for Miss Marple. She never lets them meet. Miss Marple has a very firm fan base who relish her ruthless pursuit of truth.

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The public has however always clamoured for Poirot. “A Christie for Christmas” was the cry. She, however, wanted to dispatch Poirot. She wrote “*Curtain*” in 1940. Her publishers refused to let her kill him. She kept the book hidden for thirty-five years. It was eventually published in 1975 just four months before she died. Poirot’s last case caused a sensation: the first ever

Obituary to a fictional detective was published in the New York Times on August 6th 1975: “Hercule Poirot, a Belgian detective who became internationally famous, has died in England. His age was unknown”.

Of course he lives on. Through TV, radio, stage and films both Poirot and Miss Marple have gained new fans. The ITV productions of Poirot with David Suchet are as popular in Bucharest as Bristol.

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It seems we have an insatiable appetite for crime fiction. Some of us delight in a smorgasbord of violence in the Scandi noirs or the gentler scenes with Morse morphing into Lewis, and of course Poirot where lurid descriptions of torture and agonizing deaths are rare. For the accused and victims their agony is the paranoia when they realize a murderer is often under the same roof. Why do we enjoy this so?

Amanda Ellison, a scientist in the cognitive neuroscience research unit at Durham University, has stated, “*Well written crime dramas, with complex plots and red herrings provide the sort of stimulation the brain craves.*”

All Christie fans love the final pages of the mysteries when the murderer is revealed. Clues abound, often unnoticed in conversation. A body sprawled on the beach is not necessarily a corpse. Mistrust the friend offering you a friendly nightcap. It could be laced with morphine or worse. Above all, never trust the family doctor and don't drop your guard at a cocktail party. The unfortunate Reverend Babbington, dropped his when he took a second slurp of a bitter tasting cocktail. In “*Three Act Tragedy*” that unpleasant taste was not Campari but nicotine. Two minutes later he was dead, sprawled on the floor.

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Agatha wrote eighty-three murder mysteries, over one hundred short stories and eighteen plays. “*She was at home on the*

stage as much as on the page” writes John Curran in “*Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks*”. Her most famous play is “The Mousetrap”, the longest running play in theatre history. It has now run for over sixty-five years! Her non-fiction work “*Come Tell Me How You Live*” describes her life in the Middle East, on archeological digs with her second husband, Max Mallowan. Agatha took countless photos of objects on site, developing the photos in very primitive lab conditions in the desert. She wrote “*Death in Mesopotamia*” and “*They Came to Baghdad*” in situ. She even started her autobiography in Nimrud. Nothing could stop her writing.

In Max she found her soul mate. A journalist, Beverley Nichols, attributed these words to Agatha: “*The good thing marrying an archeologist is, the older you get, the more interested in you he is*”.

Her legacy in Devon is Greenway: her hideaway, where she could be herself and read her latest mystery to the family. I was at Greenway once when after dinner, Matthew Pritchard, Christie’s grandson, read the opening chapter of “*Ordeal by Innocence*”. Matthew’s voice drew us into the description of a night full of foreboding. We all sensed the menacing gloom near the river as a stranger catches the ferry. The steady plash of the oars brings him nearer to an ordeal he dreads. Greenway Quay and the ferry were vividly described. I won’t continue as spoilers are taboo. Matthew’s reading changed my view profoundly about his grandmother’s works. It was the start of seeing her as more than a clever plotter of Who Dunnits imbued with dreadful deaths and poisons. The insight into the lonely traveller’s mind was worthy of a dark moody psychological thriller.

In “*Deadman’s Folly*” Greenway is again used as the location. Greenway is visible too in “*Five Little Pigs*”. There the victim is poisoned with hemlock, the symptoms similar to those of Socrates’ harrowing death.

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Poison so often adds dramatic interest and shock to the plot, but poison is only the WHAT that kills the victim. The page turner is the HOW it is planned and secretly administered. Sleuths, sometimes Poirot, sometimes Miss Marple, sometimes the reader succeed in uncovering the WHO in Whodunnit.

It has been said that once the villain is identified a sort of status quo is restored or is it? Is it a true happy ending? As Sarah Phelps of the BBC says, "*Status, faith and relationships are revealed as based on deceit and lies.*" However lighthearted and cosy some critics find her works, murder is a dark gruesome thing. Families are shattered. Sarah Phelps is presently adapting three Christie works. New to Agatha Christie she was shocked by the savagery in "*Then There Were None*". She was determined to emulate the simmering menace of the "*ruthless, remorseless murderer who gives the victims no chance to plead. Nowhere to hide.*" Aiden Turner of *Poldark* starred in her production. The paranoia felt by the victims stranded on the island sheds any cosy image of Christie's writing. The Times in May 2017 ran an article entitled "*How Christie got Cool*".

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Her fan base has widened with the digital age. We can get her on our Kindle or download an app. We can enjoy her in the cinema and of course on TV.

On the big screen is Kenneth Branagh's new exciting film of "*Murder on the Orient Express*". The novel written in 1934 is rated second favourite by fans. It notched up three million sales in 1974 alone, the year it was made into a film with Albert Finney as Poirot.

This year's version has Branagh as Poirot. The palpable suspense is within the claustrophobic train among the travellers all under suspicion of murder. It is hoped to bring in new fans to the Christie brand while maintaining the Christie must have:

a surprise twist revealed by Poirot. Among the cast are Judy Dench and Derek Jacobi along with Hollywood's Johnny Depp, Penelope Cruz and Michelle Pfeiffer.



Figure 2 The Orient Express Stamp

Note the figure in red fleeing along the corridor. A vital clue. Of course there's a hidden treasure in this image. Just stare at the smoke. Can you see a man's profile hidden in it? If not, start at the top with the brim of his hat. Go down to the moon, his monocle. Below that is his moustache and finally on down to his bow tie.

Ladies and Gentlemen I leave you with... Hercule Poirot.