

The Curious Life of
AGATHA CHRISTIE

When it came to
her own life, fact
really was stranger
than fiction for this
internationally
revered writer

WORDS JANE YETTRAM





Above: By March 1946, Agatha was living in Greenway House, Devon.

Below: Agatha Christie's car was found abandoned after she fled her Berkshire home on December 1926

The plots of her stories are thick with murder, suspense and intrigue. Blood and bodies lay scattered everywhere.

Yet despite the focus of her fiction, Agatha Christie seemed more like a comforting symbol of a long-gone England than anything else. Photos of the great crime-writer show a sturdy, grey-haired matronly figure (above), representing a world that's safe and unchanging.

But Agatha Christie didn't live a sheltered and quiet existence. At times her life was more mysterious than her stories. . .

On the evening of 3 December 1926, Agatha Christie left her home in Sunningdale, Berkshire and drove away into the night. The following morning, her car was discovered 20 miles south of her home, at the bottom of a hill, teetering on the edge of a chalk pit. In the car were a fur coat and a suitcase –

Agatha had vanished.

Where was this 36-year-old writer in the early years of her flourishing career? There were clues, of course, such as three letters written by the author to her husband,



her secretary and her brother-in-law, but there was no Mrs Christie. There were theories, too: memory loss, suicide or even murder. With no trace of the author, the truth was impossible to fathom. What had happened to precipitate her disappearance – and possibly her death?

The secret adversary

Agatha Christie was a traditionalist and a romantic. Born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller in 1890 to an affluent family in Torquay, she was witness to her parents' long, happy and loving marriage. Hoping she would find such love, she dreamt of being swept off her feet by a dashing hero. He emerged as Royal Flying Corps officer Archibald Christie – handsome, eloquent and charming. They married and Agatha loved Archie with a passion. Did Archie reciprocate her feelings?

The marriage was dogged by difficulties. After the birth of daughter Rosalind in 1919, Agatha lost her girlish figure. Archie was alarmed at the waning of Agatha's youth and beauty.

In 1920 her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published and from that moment her fame increased, along with the publication of more short stories and novels. Archie – who, after the war, searched in vain for a career – felt undermined and irritated by her success. And, for her part, Agatha guarded her earnings jealously.

Then, in 1925, Archie secretly started seeing the much-younger Nancy Neele, whom he had met while playing golf. But there was more for the writer to endure. Several months before Agatha's disappearance, her beloved mother died – a loss she found almost impossible to bear. She was still mourning when, on 3 December, Archie

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told her he wanted a divorce. He planned to marry Nancy Neele. As Archie left to spend the weekend with his mistress, Agatha disappeared.

Cat among the pigeons

A huge search began, police and public scouring tangled undergrowth, dragging the depths of ponds. No signs, no sightings. Once the press heard about the disappearance, they were on the trail like a pack of bloodhounds. Archie lived in fear of his infidelity being splashed across the front pages of the newspapers, and journalists picking through the details of his affair. But he



...so lived under suspicion of murdering his wife. Finally, police received a report that a lady answering Agatha's description was staying in a pa hotel in Harrogate. She was spotted by a young chambermaid, who had been fascinated by her stylish handbag and shoes. Eleven days after she went missing, Agatha Christie was identified by her husband. She had registered at the hotel as Mrs Neele – the name of her rival in love.

The official line of the Christies over the disappearance was memory loss, although this explanation was received with general scepticism. The latest theory, in Andrew Norman's biography *Agatha Christie: The Finished Portrait* (Tempus, £18.99), is that she was in a psychogenic trance precipitated depression.

Whatever the truth, from that moment on the disappearance became an entirely taboo subject in her life. Agatha would not talk about it; she would not let others talk about it; and she vented fury at any mention of it in the press. Even in her own autobiography, the 11 days are omitted, a black hole at the centre of her life.

Archie had been the love of Agatha's life, but in 1928 they divorced – just a few weeks later, Archie married Nancy.

The labours of Hercules

For the rest of her life Agatha Christie kept her silence and hid from the press; they had bounded her turning a private crisis into a public spectacle.

Perhaps she felt that by speaking at all she might reveal more than she wanted. As her famous Belgian detective character Hercule Poirot says in *The ABC Murders*: 'There is nothing so dangerous for anyone who has something to hide as conversation. . . Every time he will give himself away.'

Agatha Christie worked furiously producing

80 novels and short story collections. There were numerous plays, too, including *The Mousetrap*, which opened in London in November 1952 and is still playing today. She is believed to be the bestselling writer of fiction ever – at least two billion copies of her books have been sold, only the Bible and Shakespeare top that figure. She has had her work produced for cinema and television, and has had her books translated into countless languages.

Her characters – detective Hercule Poirot (star of her first novel) and Miss Jane Marple (the wise, intuitive elderly female detective) – are household names.

Agatha also published poetry, and wrote romantic novels under the pen name Mary Westmacott. Her last work to come to light was a play called *Chimneys*. Originally due to open in London in December 1931 with a young Laurence Olivier in the cast, the show was cancelled and the play, like its author, vanished for some time. Discovered in Canada, *Chimneys* was first performed in the UK last year.

Critics have not always been kind to Christie, ➤

Above from left to right: With second husband Max Mallowan in 1933; daughter Rosalind in 1924; Max and Agatha at home in Torquay. Below: In the midst of her disappearance, *The Daily News* on 11 December 1926, showed three disguises Agatha may have adopted





'You can't write your fate, your fate comes to you. But you can do what you like with the characters you create'

Top right: In 1974, the Queen came to see *Murder on the Orient Express* with Albert Finney
From left below: Joan Hickson as Jane Marple; David Suchet as Hercule Poirot; Belte Davis and David Niven with Peter Ustinov's Hercule Poirot in *Death On The Nile*

dubbing her a literary lightweight, a producer of formulaic fiction, but her readers are loyal and new generations still read her books in which evil is punished and wrongdoers get their comeuppance.

Maybe it was this control that was important to Agatha Christie and kept her writing through domestic strife. As she said in a rare interview at the end of the 1960s: 'You can't write your fate, your fate comes to you. But you can do what you like with the characters you create.'

Second time lucky?

After travelling to Baghdad on the Orient Express, Agatha met some archaeologist friends, who introduced her to their young colleague Max Mallowan. He was 25. She was 39.

The couple married, and remained married until Agatha's death at the age of 85 in 1976. But, though the marriage was reasonable happy, it was not perfect. Max was kind, solicitous and thoughtful, but – like Archie – he, too, had an affair. The liaison lasted 30 years and Max married his mistress a year after Agatha's death.

Barbara Parker, Max's lover, was a shadow over their marriage. But she was a shadow that Agatha tolerated, as she could not bear another divorce and the press limelight that would ensue.

The private and reclusive Agatha Christie avoided publicity at all costs. She shunned biographers and their requests for interviews and collaboration. She turned down a request to appear on the television biography show, *This Is Your Life*. Wounded by men, she had one true close friend, Nan Watts, her sister-in-law. Agatha kept a distance from her adoring public – happily supplying autographs, but never photos, distressed as she was by the effect that age had wrought on her looks.

But Agatha was not a vain, superficial woman. She had worked as a nurse and pharmacy assistant when first husband Archie was away during the Great War (and the knowledge she gained of drugs and potions figures in many stories where poison is the murder weapon of choice). When Max was serving in World War II,



she was willing to put herself in danger, working in the pharmacy of a London hospital. She could have eescaped the Blitz and bombings, but Agatha made the moral decision to stay.

Cards on the table

What else do we know of the writer dubbed the 'Queen of Crime'?

That she was a Conservative. That she loved the monarchy and class order – when Max was knighted, she was overjoyed to become Lady Mallowan, and equally delighted to be made a Dame in 1971. That she mourned the loss of the England she had grown up in. That – despite her fiction being full of blood and murder – she detested the violent modern world.

We know, too, that she was influenced by the work of Charles Dickens and Sir Arthbur Conan Doyle, creator of detective Sherlock Holmes. And we know that she admitted to rather despising her own Belgian detective Poirot – although Miss Jane Marple earned her affection. She adored her dogs, loved the music of Sibelius and Elgar and is said to have liked eating apples in the bath.

But, as Jared Cade points out in *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* (Peter Owen, £9.95), to really unravel the woman who was Agatha Christie you need to read her books. In *The ABC Murders*, Hercule Poirot says, 'Crime is terribly revealing. . . your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions.' Read Agatha's crime fiction and she may be similarly revealed.

However, despite the failure in her life of the one thing she craved – enduring love – she was productive and positive, as she acknowledged: '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.' ■

