

Travel and Adventure: Dame Agatha Christie - The queen of crime lives on

by Sharon Whitley Larsen

TORQUAY, England - It wasn't until my 10th visit to London that I finally saw Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," the world's longest-running play. I figured there was no hurry, as it has run continuously since its 1952 opening and, as yet, has no plans to close. Now in its 55th year, with over 22,500 performances, the whodunit still remains a big tourist draw, with the audience - about one-fourth American - sworn to secrecy not to reveal the ending.

IN HER HONOR - The Agatha Christie Memorial Bust, sculpted by Dutch artist Carol Van Den Bomm-Cairns, was commissioned by the English Riviera Tourist Board to honor the 100th anniversary of her birth. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. THE TOWN OF TORQUAY - Agatha Christie's birthplace and hometown, the charming seaside town of Torquay (pronounced Tor-key), is in southern England, often referred to as the English Riviera. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. HISTORIC HOME - Agatha Christie purchased this Georgian mansion in 1938. Now run by the National Trust, the home will open to the public in 2008 after extensive renovations. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. CHRISTIE'S MUSICAL MEMORIES - Agatha Christie attended concerts here at The Pavilion in Torquay. Today, it is the site of a variety of shops. CNS Photo by Sharon Whitley Larsen. There are no doubt few people who are not familiar with Christie's work, which includes more than 100 crime novels, short stories, plays, romance novels (she wrote six under a pseudonym, Mary Westmacott), a memoir of her life in the Middle East and an autobiography. Nor are there many people who haven't heard of her beloved sleuths, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot. Christie was named a dame commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1971.

It is estimated that more than 2 billion of Christie's books have been sold worldwide (reportedly she's outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare), in more than 100 languages. Her first, "The Mysterious Affair at Styles," written on a dare from her older sister, was published in 1920 after being rejected by six publishers over five years. A new Christie biography by British author Laura Thompson is scheduled to be released in the U.K. in September, to coincide with Agatha Christie Week, which will be held in her seaside Devon hometown of Torquay (pronounced "Tor-key") in the southern England area known as The English Riviera.

It was here that Christie was born - to an English mother, 36, and an American father, 44 - on Sept. 15, 1890, a good decade younger than her two siblings. She was christened Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller. Enjoying a carefree, relaxed upbringing at Ashfield, her family home - which was razed in 1962 ("One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is to have a happy childhood," she once wrote) - Christie was home-schooled in a rather unorthodox, creative manner. Her mother believed that children shouldn't be taught to read until they were 8, so Christie taught herself by age 5, and displayed a gift for piano playing, operatic singing and writing poetry. She later developed expertise in archaeology and photography.

"Her mother was very impetuous," noted Blue Badge tour guide Joan Nott, an authority on Christie's life. "I think Agatha herself was very much a lady. She was romantic, imaginative and shy, and hated public speaking." She was also a devout Anglican and donated a stained-glass window to her parish church.

Christie's world shattered when her beloved father died during her 11th year. She attended a local school, finishing school in Paris and spent three months in Cairo with her mother. As a teen she worked in a pharmacy and trained as a pharmacist during World War I, acquiring a knowledge of poison that became invaluable in her crime books.

She married a dashing Royal Flying Corps aviator, Archibald Christie, on Christmas Eve 1914, and they honeymooned at Torquay's Grand Hotel. Their daughter, Rosalind, was born in 1919 and died in 2004; Christie's grandson, Mathew Prichard, today is chairman of Agatha Christie Ltd. Later, the couple toured the world, and Christie became a lifelong traveler, especially loving Baghdad.

The Queen of Crime created her own mystery in 1926, when she disappeared for 10 days, setting off a frenzied search by police and paparazzi. It occurred while she was still grieving her mother's death, and right after her husband of 12 years abruptly informed her that he was in love with another woman, Nancy Neele, and wanted a divorce. Christie was later discovered staying at the Old Swan Hotel (then the Hydro) in Harrogate, where she had registered under "Theresa Neele" - coincidentally, the surname of her husband's mistress. To this day, despite speculation and books written about it, it's a mystery if her disappearance was a case of amnesia, a breakdown or simply getting revenge, and she never discussed it or mentioned it in her autobiography.

Shortly after that devastating episode, Christie traveled by herself to Baghdad, taking the Orient Express much of the way. It was on a subsequent Middle East trip that she met archeologist Max Mallowan, 14 years her junior, whom she married in 1930. He was knighted in 1968, whereby she was also known as Lady Mallowan; they were wed 45 years until her death in 1976.

I took the train here from London (about 3 hours). It's easy to walk around the town and see several of the sites mentioned in Christie's books and pertaining to her life, including the Princess Pier, where she roller skated as a teen; secluded Beacon Cove, where she swam and once nearly drowned; and the Pavilion, where she attended concerts.

Visitors to Torquay can also tour the extensive, scenic, 30-acre gardens at Greenway, her former home, which she purchased in 1938. The Georgian mansion, built circa 1790 on a 278-acre estate above the River Dart, is now run by The National Trust and scheduled to open for the first time to the public in late 2008. The recently renovated, 800-year-old Torre Abbey Historic House and Art Gallery - which will house many of her items in the Agatha Christie Memorial Room, including her 1937 Remington typewriter - also will reopen next year.

Some of Christie's clothes, letters, family photos and handwritten and typed manuscripts are on display at the Torquay Museum. Her books can be purchased at Agatha Christie's Riviera Collection - just outside the shop is a memorial bust of Christie, unveiled in 1990 by her daughter Rosalind, the town's tribute to its favorite author.

"I feel that Agatha Christie is vastly underrated both as an innovative crime writer and as a social historian," noted Professor B.J. Rahn of the English Department at Hunter College in New York City, who delivers slide lectures on the history of the Greenway house and gardens, and Christie's work. "She experimented with the established conventions of the genre and produced witty, ironic inversions which excited public interest and inspired fellow detective writers. ... Christie is a great caricaturist. What a talented woman! And what a gift for irony!"

When she died in January 1976, the West End theaters in London dimmed their lights for one hour.

IF YOU GO

Third Annual Agatha Christie Week: Sept. 10-16, 2007.

Includes Agatha Christie river cruises, Murder Mystery Ball at The Grand Hotel, 1920s tea dance at Oldway Mansion, lectures by crime writers, films, an Agatha Christie documentary, creative writing workshops, Agatha Christie Walking Tours and her play "The Unexpected Guest" at the Princess Theatre.

For information on Agatha Christie Week: www.agathachristie.com, www.englishriviera.co.uk. Click on "Torquay," then "Riviera Heritage," then "Agatha Christie," e-mail holiday@torbay.gov.uk.

Agatha Christie walking tour with Blue Badge Guide Joan Nott, e-mail jimtorquay@aol.com, put Agatha Christie Tour on subject line.

Greenway Gardens, open March-October. For information on hours, admission prices, getting there and the late 2008 or early 2009 scheduled opening of the house: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-vh/w-visits/w-findaplace/w-greenway/ email: greenway@nationaltrust.org.uk.

Brit Rail: www.britrail.com. Visit Britain: www.visitbritain.com.

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