

Contemporary Collectibles: Agatha Christie: queen of the mystery

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

The creator of such enduring sleuths as Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie was herself somewhat of a mysterious character. She once disappeared for 10 days in 1926, claiming amnesia.

She is a favorite of classic detective fiction collectors. Both of those creations have also made many small and big screen appearances, making for many ancillary collecting possibilities beyond just books.

The bestselling mystery writer of all time was born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller in 1890 in Torquay, England. She was the youngest daughter of a well-to-do American businessman, who died when she was young, and a British mother. Educated at home, she was encouraged in her writing from an early age.

Christie briefly studied singing and piano in Paris, but found herself too reticent to perform. She married aviator Col. Archibald Christie in 1914, and though they divorced in 1928, she retained her well-known married name.

During World War I, Christie worked as a hospital dispenser in a Red Cross facility. It was there she became an expert in poisons, a knowledge that would prove useful in her future endeavor. Many of the victims in Christie's works die from cyanide poisoning and such. With her second husband, archaeologist Sir Max Malloran, she traveled to many of the exotic locales that would provide the backgrounds for her books.

It was in 1920 that Christie introduced the elegant but arrogant Belgian detective Hercule Poirot in a book called "The Mysterious Affair of Styles." A fussy retired police inspector, his most prominent physical feature, in addition to short stature and small feet, was an exaggerated, waxed moustache. Poirot employed his "little gray cells" to deduce the identity of many a criminal, outwitting the official investigators on the case. His aide-de-camp was Capt. Arthur Hastings, his secretary the efficient Miss Lemon, and his dull adversary was Inspector Jaap.

Poirot mysteries have been translated into virtually every narrative medium: stage, radio, movies and television. Outstanding among them was the 1974 all-star-cast film "Murder on the Orient Express," with Albert Finney portraying Poirot, followed by a string of theatrical movies starring Peter Ustinov, as well as the extended British TV series starring the actor now most associated with the character, David Suchet.

As opposed to the cerebral Poirot, Christie's other memorable crime-solver, Miss Jane Marple, operated more instinctively. An elderly, snoopy spinster, Miss Marple was reputedly based on the author's own grandmother. She was featured in 17 novels, the first being "Murder at the Vicarage" in 1930.

Miss Marple made her screen debut in 1961, in "Murder She Said," starring the irrepressible Margaret Rutherford, who made four more Marple movie appearances. There have also been two Miss Marple TV series.

In toto, Agatha Christie wrote 66 detective novels, as well as six psychological romances (under the name Mary Westmacott) and plays. "The Mousetrap" holds the record for the longest run of any play in London, and "Witness for the Prosecution" was an international success.

It is estimated that 1 billion of her novels have been sold in English, with another 1 billion in more than 100 other languages.

Prices for Agatha Christie books are all over the map. Many of the mysteries are still in print at reasonable prices. But rarities can skyrocket into five figures.

I've recently spotted the following asking prices: \$27,267 for the first edition of the 1936 "Murder in Mesopotamia," with the rare pictorial dust jacket; \$15,000 for the play version of "Ten Little Niggers," with stage notes handwritten by the actress who played the lead in the original production; and \$13,633 for the first edition of the novel version of that title (with a decidedly politically incorrect dust jacket) that was, understandably, published as "And Then There were None," and later "Ten Little Indians" in the United States.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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