Agatha Christie®

A POTTED BIOGRAPHY

BORN IN TORQUAY IN 1890, AGATHA CHRISTIE BECAME, AND REMAINS, THE BEST-SELLING NOVELIST OF ALL TIME. SHE WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY WOMAN WITH A REMARKABLE MIND.

KEY FACTS

+ Prolific writing career spanning over **five decades,** with **66 crime novels, 6 non-crime novels** and over **150 short stories**. Her work includes *Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* and the genre-defining *And Then There Were None.*

+ Wrote over **20 plays**, of which the most famous, **The Mousetrap**, is the longest running play in the world since it opened in 1952.

+ With more than **2 billion books** published, she is outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her works have been widely adapted and produced across most media platforms around the world, including TV, film, radio, publishing, stage, games and digital.

+ Easily translatable, her books have been published in over **100 languages**, making her **the most translated writer of all time.**

Photo credit: **Christie Archive Trust**

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born on 15 September 1890 in Torquay, to an English mother and an American father. Her education was a combination of informal tutoring at home (mainly by her parents) and then being sent to teaching establishments in Paris where she became an accomplished opera singer and pianist.

She spent a three month "coming out season" in Cairo which resulted in various marriage proposals, and then in 1912 she met Archie Christie. They married on Christmas Eve 1914, with Archie returning to the war in France on Boxing Day. Agatha became a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross Hospital in Torquay, and when the hospital opened a dispensary, she accepted an offer to work there and completed the examination of the Society of Apothecaries. This sparked a lifelong interest in the use of poisons, which made a huge contribution to her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. The murderer's use of poison was so well described that Christie received an unprecedented honour for a writer of fiction – a review in the Pharmaceutical Journal.

She was spurred on to write a detective story by her elder sister Madge, who set her the challenge. As there were Belgian refugees in most parts of the English countryside, Torquay being no exception, Christie thought that a Belgian refugee, perhaps a former great Belgian policeman, would make an excellent detective for her first novel. Hercule Poirot was born.

By 1919, at the end of the war, Archie had found a job in the City and they had just enough money to rent a flat in London. Later that year Agatha gave birth to their daughter, Rosalind. This was also the year that publisher John Lane contracted Christie to produce five more books. She went on to be one of the first authors Penguin ever published in paperback, with fantastic results.

Following the war Agatha continued to write and to travel with Archie, including a Grand Tour of the Empire in 1922 during which she learned to surf in South Africa and Hawaii. Agatha and Archie divorced in 1928, and Agatha then fulfilled one of her lifelong ambitions: to travel on the Orient Express to the Middle East. This and future trips are recognised in books such as *Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, Murder in Mesopotamia, Appointment With Death* and *They Came to Baghdad,* as well as many short stories.

During a trip to the excavations at Ur in 1930, Agatha met archaeologist Max Mallowan - the man who became her second husband, and who was fourteen years her junior. Agatha accompanied Max on his annual archaeological expeditions for nearly 30 years.

The Duke and Duchess of Windsor attending Witness for the Prosecution on opening night (1953)". *Image Credit:* **Sir Stephen Waley-Cohen**

By 1930, having written several novels and short stories, Agatha had created a new character to act as detective. Miss Jane Marple was an amalgam of several old ladies she used to meet in villages she visited as a child and with *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Miss Marple's first outing, it appeared she had produced another popular and enduring character.

In 1971 Agatha was made a Dame of the British Empire. Her last public appearance was at the opening night of the 1974 film version of *Murder on the Orient Express*. Her verdict? A good adaptation with the minor point that Poirot's moustaches weren't luxurious enough.

Agatha died peacefully on 12 January 1976. She is buried in the churchyard of St Mary's, Cholsey, near Wallingford.

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Q&A

With Mathew Prichard (Grandson) and James Prichard (Great Grandson & Chairman of Agatha Christie Ltd).

What are your memories of your Grandmother from the time Witness for the Prosecution was written?

Mathew: During the period when she was writing plays that we all remember I actually knew her quite well. She was absolutely fascinated by the whole business of deceiving an audience. She knew how to deceive an audience that was reading a book, she'd done it for years and was an expert. But to her the real fascination was how to deceive hundreds of people in a theatre, so they don't know who's done it until the very end. This was a technical exercise that she found absolutely riveting. When you add to that her own fascination for theatre - she used to take me to Shakespeare all of my youth. She completely failed to convince me it was worth watching, but anyway… She loved the theatre, and at the first night of Witness in the Winter Garden theatre she tried to get out without anyone seeing her and ran into a whole bunch of fans. I think that's the only time I can remember her saying 'that was actually rather wonderful'. So in light of all her history of hating the press and not giving interviews and things, Witness broke new ground.

How do you manage the balance between a sense of reinvention and a sense of faithfulness to the original?

James: In terms of TV and movie adaptations, we have an expression which is 'an Agatha Christie experience'. We have a view on what that is and we try and maintain it. What you can't do is a literal translation, because different media require different things. But there is a core feeling - as well as the story and characters, of course - that we do try and respect. It's a balancing act and I assure you we spend a lot of time sweating over it and negotiating with writers and directors, trying to get the right balance. We recognise it's important to create new art in every medium, and that artists want to push the boundaries.

Mathew: There's another important element, and it's called trust. When people to take on responsibility for a film or TV adaptation, or a play, you reach a point where you have to be able to trust them. And that's why I'm very happy that we've got Lucy in charge here.

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