

The Biography of Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie was a 19th century British murder mystery writer who began her literary career because of the financial struggles she encountered after her father's death, and later after her divorce. Often referred to as "The Queen of Crime," Agatha wrote over eighty detective novels, which have been translated into approximately forty-five different languages. In fact, her books have sold over two billion copies, making her the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by Shakespeare and the Bible.

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller Christie was born to the Miller family on September 15, 1890 in Torquay, Devon, in the southwest of England. She lived at Ashfield, a large seaside villa, with her mother Clarissa, her father Frederick, and her two older siblings Madge and Monty. Agatha had a happy, carefree childhood. She lived in an affluent family, and with her older sister and brother away at boarding school, she was given the full attention of her nurse and mother. Agatha's mother played a crucial role in her life; not only was she the most important thing in Agatha's life, but she also inspired her to write. Ever since Agatha was born, her mother would tell her fantastical stories, most of which were made up on the spot, and all of which taught the moral of the prevalence of good over evil. Agatha was mesmerized by these stories, and once she was left alone to play, she would often imagine even more grand and dramatic versions of her mother's magical tales.

From some unexplainable whim, Clara decided that unlike her first two children, Agatha would not be taught to read until she was at least eight years old. Consequentially, she declared that the many books of Ashfield should be kept out of Agatha's reach. However, somehow, the curious five-year-old Agatha got her hands on a

book and taught herself to read. When Agatha's nurse found out and relayed the shocking news to her mother, Clara ordered that Agatha's schoolroom be completely filled with books. "If Agatha was reading, she should be reading everything."¹ Excited by the new world of written stories she had discovered, Agatha read everything in sight, from Charles Dickens and Edgar Allen Poe to Lewis Carroll and Rudyard Kipling. Before long, she had learned how to write as well.

In 1901, when Agatha was 11 years-old, her father died. This came as a horrible blow to Agatha's mother, who hid herself in her room in agonizing despair. The young Agatha was sent by her grandmother to say to her mother: "Mummy, father is at peace now. He is happy. You wouldn't want him back, would you?" Clara passionately replied: "Yes, I would, I would do anything in the world to have him back — anything, anything at all. I'd force him to come back, if I could. I want him, I want him to be *here*, now, in this world with *me*."² Her mother's vehement love for her father inspired Agatha greatly. It not only formed her belief in the possibility of true love, but also influenced her writing; passionate love, love so strong that it causes one to forget all religious faith or morals, is one of the most important motives for murder in Agatha Christie's detective novels.

Another example of the influences of Agatha's childhood on her work is the recurring nightmare she had of the "Gunman." In her dream, the "Gunman," an 18th century soldier with bright blue eyes who carried a musket, would appear unexpectedly on ordinary occasions, such as during a picnic or on a walk. The frightening thing about the "Gunman" wasn't that he would shoot Agatha; it was his power to hide behind the

¹ Richard Hack, *Duchess of Death*, p. 10.

² Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, p. 113.

masks of the people she loved and trusted most in her life. This idea that people are not always who they seem to be is a key element in Agatha Christie's detective novels. Anyone — from the innocent child to the foolish old maid — can be the murderer.³

Agatha had a taciturn nature from a very young age. As her family liked to laughingly put it, she had a strong aversion to “parting with information.”⁴ At the age of three or four, Agatha was terrified to learn that her Nursie had overheard her talking aloud to her imaginary friends, the Kittens. Feeling that her privacy had been violated, Agatha resolved never to talk aloud again, which possibly led to her famous inability to express herself even as an adult. Paradoxically, Agatha got into the habit of developing the plots of her books through dramatized scenes, which she rehearsed aloud. Still, in consistence with her character, Agatha chose to primarily write murder mysteries, which left her little room for self-expression and gave her “a fictional mask behind which she could hide.”⁵

On October 12th, 1912, Agatha met Archie Christie, a handsome, charming young man. Despite the fact that they had almost nothing in common, the two experienced an immediate attraction. For two long years, Archie and Agatha were separated because of the First World War. Then, on Christmas Eve of 1914, ignoring her mother's admonition, Agatha married Archie Christie.

During the World War, Archie served as a Lieutenant in the Royal Flying Corps, and Agatha worked first as a volunteer nurse at a local hospital, and later as a hospital dispensing pharmacist. Agatha's work in dispensing, though she found it quite boring,

³ Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 16.

⁴ Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, p. 104.

⁵ Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 34.

was an extremely important influence on her writing. It was then, when she had so much spare time on her hands, that Agatha got the idea to write a detective novel using her newfound knowledge of poisons.

It is important to note that writing a novel wasn't a new idea to Agatha; since she was a teenager, Agatha's mother had been encouraging her to write. However, the prospect of money was ultimately the main catalyst to the beginning of her literary career. Financial problems had been developing slowly in Agatha's family ever since her father's death in 1901, and by 1916, keeping her beloved home Ashfield was becoming a far from easy feat. So, in hope of literary success, Agatha began to write her first mystery novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

On August 5th, 1919, Agatha gave birth to a daughter who she called Rosalind. The birth of Rosalind was a joy that brought Agatha and Archie — whose relationship had been suffering a decline — closer together. A year later, in 1920, Agatha finally published *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Achieving rapid success as an author, Agatha immediately began to write a second book. By 1923, Agatha had earned a respectable reputation as a detective novelist. Unfortunately, Archie was unable to share in the joy of Agatha's success, and was often indifferent and even discouraging when Agatha tried to discuss ideas for books with him.

By late 1926, Agatha had published six novels, and her name was recognized throughout all of England. However, in the same year that she achieved her fame and success, Agatha experienced the most traumatic episode in her life, which led to the biggest manhunt in British history.

On the night of December 4th, 1926, Agatha Christie's car was found abandoned at the side of the road at Newlands Corner in Surrey; Agatha had disappeared. The press exploded with the news. Had Agatha committed suicide? Or had she staged her mysterious disappearance, inspired by the dramatic plots of her detective novels? With the help of five hundred British policemen and a mob of eager volunteers, a major manhunt began. Regrettably, they had no luck in finding any tangible clues that could explain the reason for Agatha Christie's disappearance; this was a mystery that only the Queen of Crime herself could solve. Finally, eleven days later, Agatha Christie was found at the Hydropathic Hotel in Harrogate, checked in under the name of Ms. Neele. She claimed to be the victim of amnesia, and, as reluctant to part with information as ever, refused to tell the press anything more. Even in her autobiography, which was published after her death, Agatha remained evasive when giving an account of her disappearance. To this day, there are many biographers that dedicate entire volumes to their attempts to understand the cause of Agatha Christie's disappearance.

However, although the theories of Agatha's mysterious disappearance vary, they have one common theme: Agatha Christie was depressed. In the spring of 1926, Agatha's mother passed away, causing her to fall into a terrible depression. Emotionally unsupported by her husband, Agatha began to lose her identity, sometimes even forgetting her name. Then, on the day of their daughter Rosalind's birthday, Archie asked Agatha for a divorce; her melancholia was too much for him to bear, and he had fallen in love with his mistress, Nancy Neele. (Ironically, Agatha's unconscious mind had inspired her to use Neele's name as an alias at the Hydropathic Hotel. This caused the name of Archie's mistress, which he had tried to keep out of the divorce courts and press at all

costs, to be featured on the front page of every newspaper throughout the country—the kind of harsh justice that Agatha’s conscious mind would not have allowed.)⁶ These two traumatic events were probably the main stimuli of Agatha’s fugue.

Agatha had previously refused her husband’s request for a divorce on the grounds of both her religious morals and her outrage that Archie would abandon not only her, but also his beloved daughter, Rosalind. However, after her reappearance, the traumatized Agatha took her good friend Campbell’s advice and followed through with the divorce. However, Agatha’s divorce from Archie brought her many financial troubles. Desperate to make money to support herself and her child, Agatha conquered the writer’s block that had tormented her after her mother’s death and began to write again.

By the fall of 1928, Agatha was ready for a change of scenery, so she decided to go away for several months on her own. Inspired by a young couple that had recently traveled to Baghdad, Agatha booked herself a ticket on the Orient Express and headed to the Middle East. There, Agatha had an amazing experience, the highlight of which was her visit to the renowned archeological sites in Ur, Iraq. In fact, her experience was so fantastic that she decided to return again. That time, Agatha met Max Mallowan, a 25-year-old archeologist working at the excavation sites. The two had an immediate connection and became great friends. Then, one night, Max proposed to Agatha, taking her completely by surprise. Agatha writes: “It had never occurred to me that Max and I could be on those terms. We were *friends*. We had become instant and closer friends, it seemed to me, than I and any friend had ever been before.”⁷ It took a while for Agatha to decide to accept Max’s proposal, primarily because of their age difference (Agatha was

⁶ Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 117.

⁷ Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, p. 416.

fourteen years his senior), but eventually she agreed. To avoid the press that could have easily destroyed their wedding joy, Agatha and Max eloped to Scotland. There, they were married on September 11th in a small church in Edinburgh.

Agatha and Max had a very successful marriage. The two were independent, ambitious people who supported each other in all of their endeavors. Unlike Archie Christie, Max Mallowan was not threatened by Agatha's international fame and felt comfortable in her writer's world. Agatha, too, was comfortable in her husband's world of archeology, and even contributed to the work on the excavation sites in Ur. Over time, she developed a great love for the Middle East, and used it as the setting for several of her detective novels. Finding a new zest for life in the joys of the Middle East and the comfort of her marriage, Agatha wrote more than she had ever written before. During this time she wrote some of her best works, including *Murder on the Orient Express*, *The ABC Murders*, and *Death on the Nile*.

During the Second World War, Max was sent abroad as a colonial administrator in North Africa. Separated from her husband and missing him deeply, Agatha moved to London and busied herself with volunteering at a local hospital. Still, most importantly of all, she busied herself with writing. During the time of the war, Agatha published ten books, and adapted three plays. As the biographer, Gillian Gill, wrote, "She used her fiction to shut out the cold and the gloom and the sorrow not only for herself but also for the thousands of her readers."⁸

One of the most intense experiences for Agatha during the war was her writing of *Absent in the Spring*, a 50,000-page novel that she wrote in three days flat. Agatha

⁸ Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 151

published this book under the pseudonym of Mary Westmacott, an alias that allowed her to publish far more expressive and personal work than her detective fiction. In fact, Agatha often described writing crime novels as an arduous chore, but in writing her Westmacott works — such as *Absent in the Spring*, and her almost autobiographical *Unfinished Portrait* — Agatha found far more enjoyment.

In 1945, the war ended, and Max and Agatha were reunited after three years of separation. To Agatha's relief, the couple picked up right where they had left off.

In the next few decades Agatha continued to write her novels and plays, but at a slower pace than she did during the thirties and forties. Still, her fame did not fade, and by the 1970s Agatha was recognized as one of the greatest detective-story writers of all time. In fact, in 1971, the royal family itself recognized Agatha Christie's greatness by making her a Dame of the British Empire. Finally, on January 12, 1976, Agatha Christie died at the age of eighty-six.

Today, over a century after her death, Agatha Christie's legacy lives on; her influence on the crime genre can be seen in the works of many modern mystery writers such as Stieg Larsson and Stephen King. Agatha Christie was an enigma, and unlike her fictional work, the riddle of her complex character and fascinating life are a nearly impossible mystery to solve. Perhaps that is the reason that her writing achieved such remarkable success. Unlike other authors of her time, Agatha left her biographical information and personal opinions out of her work, hiding behind her fictional characters and plots. This left her murder mysteries to be appreciated simply for what they were: brilliant works of fiction. Mystery novels written by a mysterious author have a certain

charm, and to this day, Agatha Christie is considered to be one of the greatest mystery writers of all time.

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