

Agatha Christie

AGATHA CHRISTIE – THE EXPLORER AND ARCHAEOLOGIST

Agatha Christie's first season was spent in fashionable Cairo. She spent most of the trip absorbed by the social whirl of dances, races and polo games arranged for the British army soldiers stationed there but the atmosphere of Egypt made a lasting impression.

In 1928, she returned to the East, fulfilling a lifelong ambition to travel on the Venice-Simplon Orient Express to Baghdad. Agatha Christie loved trains and they suited her gift for observation. Her autobiography describes the:

“Fascination with looking out at an entirely different world: going through mountain gorges, watching ox-carts and picturesque wagons, studying groups of people on the station platforms.”

In 1934, the novel *Murder on the Orient Express* was published. Set on a train stuck in a snowdrift, it seems to have been at least partly inspired by Agatha Christie's own adventures. On the return trip from Nineveh in 1931 she had been stranded on the Simplon-Orient Express in the border area between Greece and Turkey when wet weather had washed part of the track away.

In Baghdad she visited the archaeological digs at Ur and was received warmly by the archaeologist Leonard Woolley because his wife, Katherine, had just finished reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. On a return trip in 1930, she would be introduced to Leonard Woolley's assistant Max Mallowan - the man who became her second husband.

Agatha's life began again when she met Max. For the next 30 years she accompanied him on his archaeological digs in the Middle East, sleeping on site in the exhibition house. She loved the simplicity of desert life in the open air, and threw herself wholeheartedly into the investigation of ancient civilisations. She developed the photographs on the early excavations and later photographed the digs herself. She also worked on the restoration and labelling of ancient exhibits; cleaning and conserving the delicate ivory pieces. She was, in her lifetime, one of the most informed women in the archaeological field.

Agatha Christie continued to write on location and many of her best-loved books were informed by direct observation of life in the east, in particular: *Death on the Nile*, *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *They Came to Baghdad*.

The actual layout of the Nile steamer SS Karnak, for example, is crucial to the plot of *Death on the Nile*. The excavations in Ur inspired *Murder in Mesopotamia*, she actually dedicated the book to “**my many archaeological friends in Iraq and Syria**”. The atmospheric description in *Appointment With*

Death were based on her own visits to the magnificent site at Petra and in *They Came to Baghdad* the heroine talks about her experience on a dig in Southern Mesopotamia.

Looking back over her life as an author she said that, whilst the characters that she created were fictitious, the settings were always real.

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