

THE AGATHA CHRISTIE READING GROUP GUIDE

“Agatha Christie is a brilliant literary conjuror. She places her characters face downwards like playing cards, shuffles them with cunning hands, and time after time we point to the wrong card. She has intrigued, thrilled, and baffled readers for nearly ninety years and the magic is as potent as ever.”
—P.D. James

Agatha Christie is the bestselling mystery novelist of all time.

Beginning in 1920 with the publication of the stunning *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie set new standards for mystery writers. Cleverly plotted, with casts of characters drawn with an impeccable eye and a shrewd understanding of human nature, her novels gave the world two of the most enduring characters in detective fiction: Hercule Poirot, the eccentric, obsessively tidy Belgian detective who relies on his “little gray cells” to work out the complexities of a crime, and Miss Jane Marple, the elderly spinster in the quaint English village of St. Mary Mead, who knows a great deal about what drives people to commit crimes.

In this reading group guide, created especially to accompany Black Dog & Leventhal’s hardcover editions of the novels, you’ll find questions and discussion topics designed to enhance your exploration of some of Christie’s best-loved novels. Whether you are reading Christie for the first time, re-visiting novels you read long ago, or deepening your acquaintance with the remarkable detectives you’ve encountered in the popular movies and television series based on Christie’s books, you’ll soon discover why Christie remains the “Queen of Crime” to millions of fans.

Murder on the Orient Express (1934)

1. The fellow travelers in *Murder on the Orient Express* represent a wide range of nationalities, classes, and personalities. To what extent is the cast of characters representative of a particular time and place? Does it also reflect human society in a more general, universal sense? If so, how does Christie achieve this?
2. How does the unusual setting of *Murder on the Orient Express* shape the structure of Poirot's investigation? What advantages does it give him? What challenges does it present that makes it more complicated than other cases with which he has been involved?
3. Poirot recounts what he knows about each of the passengers (pp. 184-187) and makes a list of "things needing explanation" (p. 189-90). In addition to clarifying the facts, what other purpose do these summaries serve? What do they reveal about Poirot's methods? What elements of his personality—good and bad—come into focus in his discussions with M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine?
4. Discuss the individual interviews Poirot conducts with the passengers. Does his approach differ according to the class, gender, background, or profession of the interviewees? As you accumulate information about circumstances surrounding the crime and learn more about the identities of the passengers, which characters emerge as the most likely suspects?
5. In writing *Murder on the Orient Express*, Christie was clearly inspired by the most sensational crime of the period—the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's son on March 1, 1932 and the discovery of his body ten weeks later. Does the connection to this famous, real-life tragedy enhance the power of the novel? What can a fictionalized version of a crime provide that contemporaneous reporting or historical accounts cannot? Is Christie's "resolution" more satisfying than what actually occurred in the Lindbergh case?

GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIE AND HER BOOKS

1. Does Christie's writing style change over the course of time? Discuss the differences, if any, in the way the plots unfold and information is revealed; the intricacies of both the crimes and the solutions; and the scope and depth of her portraits of society and of human nature. Citing specific books or scenes, would you say that Christie improved or declined as a writer?
2. Do Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple grow as characters? If you read the novels in the order in which they were written, do you learn more about them and their ways of thinking? Does your opinion of them change? Does Christie betray a preference for one or the other?
3. What methods of reasoning and investigation do each of the detectives rely on? Are there similarities between their approaches?
4. Imagine a meeting between Poirot and Miss Marple. Do you think they would get along? Respect each other? Make a good investigative team?
5. What characteristics do Christie's villains share? Are her explanations of their motivations always consistent with the portraits she paints of them in the course of the novels?
6. Discuss Christie's portraits of the police. Are there difference between the way they are portrayed in the Poirot and Marple books?
7. Does Christie respect the rules of "fair play" one expects in a well-conceived and well-written mystery? Does she provide clues to the culprit without giving away too much? Does she ever keep the reader from knowing things the detective knows?
8. In *Murder at the Vicarage*, Miss Marple says, "I know that in books [the guilty party] is always the most unlikely person. I never find that rule applies in real life." Does Christie adhere to this theory herself? Which, if any, of the novels defy it?

9. In addition to the tension created by the central mysteries, what other elements add to the narrative pull of the novels? Do the romantic entanglements and family relationships in the books, for example, engage your interest and sympathy? Do you think that the books transcend the boundaries of the mystery genre?
10. One of the pleasures of Christie's fiction is the intimate view one gets of life of England between the World Wars and the years immediately following World War II. How do Christie's depictions of the period compare to others you have read? Do her books confirm your previous impressions of mid-twentieth century English society? Were there details that surprised or disturbed you?
11. Compare and contrast the detection methods employed in these classics to the techniques featured in contemporary crime novels or television programs. Which style do you find more compelling and why?
12. Christie is a seminal figure in crime literature. What contemporary mystery novelists are her most obvious heirs?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agatha Christie was born in the Devonshire seaside resort of Torquay in 1890. She first tried her hand at detective fiction while working at a hospital during World War I, creating the detective Hercule Poirot in her debut novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). She achieved wide popularity with *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), which would be followed by seventy-nine more novels and story collections over the next six decades. Characterized by their intricate plotting, her works were regular bestsellers in both England and America, and have been translated into more than fifty languages, making her one of the most popular authors of all time. In addition to her influential legacy as the Queen of Crime, Christie also found success as a playwright, and many of her works were adapted for film and television. Agatha Christie achieved Britain's highest honor in 1971 when she was made a Dame of the British Empire. She died in 1976.