

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.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920)

1. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is set in a country manor in England during World War I. In what ways are both time and place central to the novel?
2. In creating the voice of a narrator/assistant, Christie echoes the techniques used by Arthur Conan Doyle in his classic Sherlock Holmes mysteries. How does the partnership of Hastings and Poirot differ from the famous crime-solving team of Watson and Holmes? What other literary traditions does Christie draw on in the novel? For example, what does it share with nineteenth-century novels of manners?
3. Almost all of the principle characters fall under suspicion in the course of the novel. Does Hastings make assumptions based on his own prejudices or do the characters' actions provide viable motives in every case? Does the reader see things that Hastings doesn't?
4. To what extent do social conventions determine the behavior of the characters? How do the relationships among them, either acknowledged or hidden, add to the tensions and the complications of the plot?
5. Poirot chides Hastings for his failure to use both deduction and instinct to make sense of the clues (p. 123). How does Poirot's final explanation (pp. 185-196) illuminate the importance of both factors in solving the mystery?

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1925)

1. How does the use of Dr. Sheppard as narrator affect your expectations of his role in the novel? In what ways do his manner—and his profession—contribute to his believability as a reliable, objective reporter?
2. How does Christie establish Sheppard's personality in the first few pages of the book? What do you learn about him from his conversation with his sister Caroline (pp. 3-5), his description of village history and village gossip (pp. 6-9), and his first encounter with Hercule Poirot (pp. 17-20)? Is his behavior during his meeting with Roger Ackroyd (pp. 35-37) consistent with your first impressions of him?
3. As the novel unfolds, several people emerge as “likely suspects,” including Ackroyd's sister-in-law, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd; her daughter Flora; Major Blunt, the big-game hunter; Geoffrey Raymond, Ackroyd's personal secretary; Ralph Paton, Ackroyd's stepson; the butler, Parker; and Ursula Bourne, the maid who resigned the afternoon of the murder. Which of these characters most fully aroused your own suspicions and why?
4. How does the character of Poirot evolve during the course novel? In addition to the narrator's point of view, what shapes the reader's impressions of him? In what ways do Poirot's behavior, suggestions, and opinions create a subtle “parallel” narrative to Sheppard's account?
5. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* ends with perhaps the most famous “surprising twist” in mystery fiction. Are there scenes in which Sheppard (or Christie) intentionally misleads the reader? Are there, on the other hand, hints about the solution buried throughout the book?

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?

The A.B.C. Murders (1935)

1. The narrative voice in *The A.B.C. Murders* alternates between first and third person. What does this add to the reading experience? Does it increase the tension? Involve the reader more thoroughly in the investigation? Give the reader an “upper hand”?
2. In the 1930s the practice of psychiatry was just beginning to make an impact on society, and Christie brings in Dr. Thompson, a famous alienist, to help the police in their investigation by offering psychological insight into the killer (p. 51, p. 55, pp. 81-83, for example). Based on what you know about human psychology and behavior, do the doctor’s assumptions and opinions appear to be valid? Does his participation influence Poirot’s approach to the case?
3. Poirot and Hastings discuss the differences between their previous cases, where they investigated “private murders,” and the “cold-blooded, impersonal murder” they are facing in this case (p. 90-91). What does this conversation reveal about Poirot’s style and strengths as a detective? What factors in particular undermine Poirot’s abilities to resolve the discrepancies in this case?
4. Are the depictions of the “interested parties” (Mrs. Asher’s niece, Elizabeth Barnard’s sister and boy-friend, and Carmichael Clarke’s secretary and brother) realistic? Are their actions and reactions natural and credible under the circumstances?
5. What similarities are there between *The A.B.C. Murders* and present-day crime stories, either real or fictional, you are familiar with? What aspects of the case and the way it is handled are particularly, perhaps surprisingly, contemporary?

Evil Under the Sun (1941)

1. Poirot contends that vacation spots are an ideal place to commit a crime (p. 9). What makes his reasoning persuasive? What flaws do you see in it? Do the events in the book support his notion?
2. Poirot declares “There is no such thing as a plain fact of murder. Murder springs nine times out of ten from the character and circumstances of the murdered person” (p. 66). What does the reader know about Arlena before the murder? Discuss the differing perceptions of her among the hotel guests—as well as her perceptions of herself (p. 25, for example)—and what they reveal about her character and her circumstances.
3. Compare the approaches taken by Poirot and the police during the interviews with the hotel guests (Chapter Six). What specific things does Poirot focus on, in contrast to the police? What do his questions establish not only about the facts of the case, but about the interests, personalities, and motives of each possible suspect?
4. How do the interactions among the characters change during the investigation? Do they clarify or complicate the reader’s understanding of the crime and its possible solution?
5. In the beginning of the novel, Poirot says, “evil does walk the earth and can be recognized as such” (p. 10). Is the belief in the reality of evil foolish or illogical or does it provide a reasonable way of explaining otherwise inexplicable crimes or events? To what extent does it provide the key to solving the murder in *Evil Under the Sun*?

Murder at the Vicarage (1930)

1. *Murder at the Vicarage* introduces Miss Marple and the quiet village of St. Mary Mead. Why do you think Christie chose to use a clergyman as the narrator? In what ways is the voice of an “insider” more effective than an omniscient, authorial voice would be?
2. What does the conversation at the tea party (p. 10-15) reveal about Miss Marple’s personality? How do her tone and observations set her apart from other women? What adjectives, both positive and negative, would you use to describe her manner?
3. Discuss the relationships between Miss Marple and the police. What assumptions (or prejudices) underlie their interactions? Do their conflicts reflect a natural antipathy between amateur and professional or do they stem from the personalities of Miss Marple, Colonel Melchett, and Inspector Slack?
4. *Murder at the Vicarage* is at once a mystery story and an entertaining portrait of life in an isolated English village. How successfully does Christie integrate the two different genres? Talk about such elements as the use of humor and satire, as well as the inclusions of detailed scenes of everyday life, descriptions of the police procedures, and the concise, deftly rendered portraits of various secondary characters.
5. If you are familiar with Miss Marple from the television series and movies based on the books, in what ways does Christie’s original portrait of her differ from the way she has been presented on screen (both large and small)?

The Body in the Library (1942)

1. How do the opening scenes set the tone for the rest of the novel? What do the reactions of Colonel and Mrs. Bantry to finding the body, the conversations between Mrs. Bantry and Miss Marple, and chief constable Melchett's interview with Colonel Bantry establish about the people and everyday life in St. Mary Mead?
2. What are your initial impressions of Miss Marple? How important are her own statements and observations in conveying her character and style? What role do the reactions of other people play?
3. There are many references throughout the book to class differences. How do these color the investigation? In what ways are the police and Miss Marple herself influenced by their own backgrounds and social positions? What other biases are expressed in the novel? Do they simply help to create a sense of the period or do they offer significant clues into the characters and the values that shape their behavior?
4. Miss Marple and the other women in the village are perceived as gossips, sometimes in a kindly way and other times with annoyance and impatience. How does Christie use this perception to further the plot?
5. To what extent does Miss Marple's reliance on "specialized knowledge" (p. 103) explain her success at solving this crime? What techniques—both mental and practical—does she employ?

A Murder Is Announced (1950)

1. Is the anonymous announcement in the local newspaper that sets the plot in motion credible or does it seem like a gimmick?
2. Sir Henry Clithering calls Miss Marple “...the finest detective God ever made. Natural genius cultivated in a suitable soil” (p. 31). In this, and the other Miss Marple novels, which factor—her native intelligence or her intimate knowledge of her community—plays a greater role? Would she succeed as a detective in another setting?
3. *A Murder Is Announced* is set in the post-World War II period. How does the novel reflect the lingering repercussions the war? Discuss the undercurrents that inform Christie’s portrayal of Mitzi (p. 48, p. 83, p. 94) and of Rudi Scherz (p. 61), for example, as well as the significance of Miss Marple’s reminiscences about the pre-war period and Inspector Craddock’s reaction to them (p. 96).
4. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that several characters are not who they seemed to be. How does Christie make these masquerades believable, both to the other characters and to the reader? Mistaken identity has a long tradition as a literary device. What other literary device—including familiar character-types—does Christie make use of?
5. When revealing the villain, Miss Marple says, “Weak and kindly people are often very treacherous. And if they’ve got a grudge against life it saps the little moral strength they may possess.” Do you agree with this statement? Can you give examples, either from literature or from real life, to support it?

GENERAL QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIE AND HER BOOKS

GENERAL QUESTIONS

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.