The Mysterious Affair at Styles
by Agatha Christie
Agatha Christie

- born September 15, 1890, in Torquay, Devon, England
- daughter of Frederick Alvah and Clarissa Miller
- Education: Tutored at home by her mother until age 16; later studied singing and piano in Paris.
- married Archibald Christie (a colonel in the Royal Air Corps), December 24, 1914 (divorced, 1928)
- children: (first marriage) Rosalind
- married Max Edgar Lucien Mallowan (an archaeologist), September 11, 1930 (died, 1978)
- died January 12, 1976, in Wallingford, England

A plaque for the Agatha Christie mile at Torre Abbey in Torquay.

Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agatha_Christie_plaque_-_Torre_Abbey.jpg
Prolific output

- Christie's many works have sold a phenomenal two billion copies—a record topped only by the Bible and William Shakespeare—and have been translated into 103 languages; her books still sell a reported twenty-five million copies a year.

- Her play The Mousetrap, originally written as a birthday gift for Queen Mary, is the longest-running play in theatrical history.

- I don't enjoy writing detective stories," Christie once told an interviewer. "I enjoy thinking of a detective story, planning it, but when the time comes to write it, it is like going to work every day, like having a job." Christie only began writing on a dare from her sister, who challenged her to "write a good detective story." Christie wrote one, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, and in 1920 it was published by the English firm of Lane.

- Although the book only sold some two thousand copies and earned Christie seventy dollars, the publication encouraged her to continue writing mysteries. Throughout the 1920s she wrote them steadily, building a loyal following among mystery aficionados for her unfailingly clever plots.

Popularity of her works

• Julian Symons wrote in *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*: “Although the detective story is ephemeral literature, the puzzle which it embodies has a permanent appeal. . . . If her work survives it will be because she was the supreme mistress of a magical skill that is a permanent, although often secret, concern of humanity: the construction and the solution of puzzles.“

• Over the fifty years of Christie's writing career, other factors have been suggested for the phenomenal popularity of her books. Lejeune cited three primary factors: "The texture of her writing; a texture smooth and homely as cream, . . . the ability to buttonhole a reader, to make (as Raymond Chandler put it) 'each page throw the hook for the next,' . . . [and] the quality of cosiness." A Times Literary Supplement reviewer offered the view that Christie "never excluded any characters from possible revelation as murderers, not the sweet young girl, the charming youth, the wise old man, not even the dear old lady.“

• **Source Citation**
  
Christie as unoriginality at it’s best

• “In short, Christie's prime virtue is her unoriginality in everything bar plot. But hers is an unoriginality presented always with exceptional rightness. Other unoriginal crime writers produce books in which uninteresting people say uninteresting things and try to make up for it often by frantic activity.

• Christie gives us ordinary, not wildly exciting, people, but by describing them with exact rightness she makes them clear and clean to every reader. Nothing clogs. Her timing is unostentatiously right. This is what makes her such a good storyteller: you get the right piece of information at exactly the right moment. And you never get digressions, those bits of cleverness that tempt other writers.

The eccentric and amusing Poirot

• Undoubtedly her most popular detective has been Hercule Poirot, an eccentric and amusingly pompous Belgian detective who Christie described in The Mysterious Affair at Styles as "an extraordinary-looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg. His moustache was very still and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound."

• According to David J. Grossvogel in Mystery and Its Fictions: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie, Christie "was aware of the faintly ridiculous figure cut by Poirot when she baptized him. She named him after a vegetable--the leek (poireau, which also means a wart, in French)--to which she opposed the (barely) Christian name Hercule, in such a way that each name would cast ridicule on the other." Grossvogel saw this bit of absurdity as essential to Poirot's success as a character. He believed that, in order to maintain the tension in a mystery story, there must be some doubt as to the detective's ability to solve the crime.

Christie’s mediocrity and her genius

- Judged by most conventional criteria, Agatha Christie is, at best, a mediocre writer. Her characterization is almost always two-dimensional, and in novel after novel she deploys the same troupe of pasteboard stereotypes.
- She seems convinced that all foreigners have funny and instantly recognizable national mannerisms, and her sense of place is rudimentary. Her prose can be tersely economical but she lapses into cliché on the least provocation.
- For Christie's paramount concern is with the creation of plot, and anything which might tend to obscure the stark linear sequence of problematically related events is ruthlessly excised. Her novels progress toward the public revelation of factual truth (the big reveal).
- Her detectives remain essentially unaffected, even by their most gruesome adventures. Christie's sleuths, that is, enter the narrative fully formed; their function is not to develop in response to events but only to analyze those events in order to distill apparent chaos into logical order.

Creating Hercule Poirot

• Christie wrote more than 30 novels featuring Poirot. Among the most popular were "The Murder of Roger Ackroyd" (1926), "Murder on the Orient Express" (1934), and "Death on the Nile" (1937).
Golden Age mysteries

The rules of the game were codified in 1929 by Ronald Knox.[4] According to Knox, a detective story "must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end."

Knox's "Ten Commandments" (or "Decalogue") are as follows:

1. The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to know.
2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.
6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective himself must not commit the crime.
8. The detective is bound to declare any clues which he may discover.
9. The "sidekick" of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind: his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

Discussing a whodunit

• Did you figure out "whodunit"? How early on?
• Was there a twist that threw you?
• How did you feel about the main characters? Did you connect with the characters in the book?
• We are introduced to Poirot in this book. Can you give a few words to describe him?
• Hastings was a bit frustrated with Poirot a times, how do you think it would be to work with Poirot?
• This is a mystery novel written in the first person. How did the narration affect the story? How would a third person narration that revealed more characters’ thoughts have changed the story?

Adapted from: http://www.shelfari.com/groups/10364/discussions/452112/-b-The-Mysterious-Affair-at-Styles-b-group-discussion
Agatha Christie’s grave

Source:
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agatha_christie%27s_grave.jpg
Is this enough for a legacy?

• “Upon Christie's death in 1976, Max Lowenthal of the New York Times offered this summary of her work: "Dame Agatha's forté was supremely adroit plotting and sharp, believable characterization (even the names she used usually rang true). Her style and rhetoric were not remarkable; her writing was almost invariably sound and workmanlike, without pretense or flourish. Her characters were likely to be of the middle-middle class or upper-middle class, and there were certain archetypes, such as the crass American or the stuffy retired army officer now in his anecdotage. However familiar all this might be, the reader would turn the pages mesmerized as unexpected twist piled on unexpected twist until, in the end, he was taken by surprise. There was simply no outguessing Poirot or Miss Marple--or Agatha Christie."

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