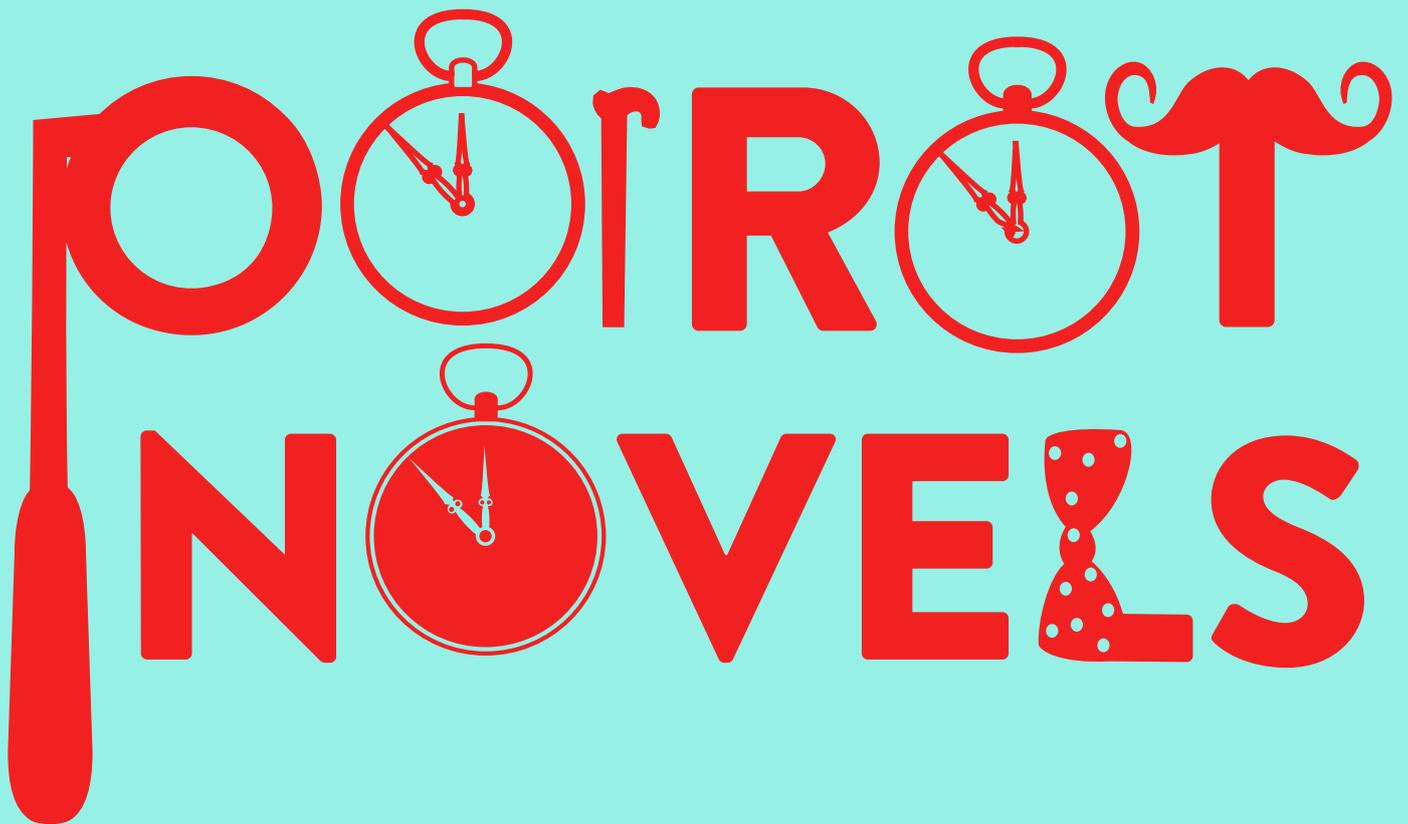


Sophie Hannah's
Review Guide
to all of
Agatha Christie's

POIROT
NOVELS



AGATHA CHRISTIE'S POIROT NOVELS IN ORDER

What follows is very much my personal take on these novels. I have no idea if I'm objectively right. I think of Christies as falling into four categories: Top Notch, Excellent, Solid and Flawed. These, then, are my categories.

Plot descriptions are taken from www.amazon.co.uk, and reproduced as they appear on the back covers of Agatha Christie books. The plot descriptions are copyright © HarperCollins. The ratings and opinions are mine alone.

To give you an idea of Christie's interests during each decade, I've added some visual elements which characterise each period.

THE 1920s



The Mysterious Affair at Styles (1920)

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was the result of a dare from her sister Madge who challenged her to write a story. The story begins when Hastings is sent back to England from the First World War due to injury and is invited to spend his sick leave at the beautiful Styles Court by his old friend John Cavendish. Here, Hastings meets John's step-mother, Mrs Inglethorpe, and her new husband, Alfred. Despite the tranquil surroundings Hastings begins to realise that all is not right. When Mrs Inglethorpe is found poisoned, suspicion falls on the family, and another old friend, Hercule Poirot, is invited to investigate.

Rating: Excellent.

Tip: Not the best Poirot to start with, although it's the first

There are many brilliant ingredients in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, setting up what would become a classic Christie template: a large country house, a closed community of suspects, a floorplan halfway through in which you can see where all the bedrooms are (and it's so satisfying to see all those suspects sleeping in close proximity to one another - it's not easy to find a house large enough, on *Rightmove* for example, to accommodate all suspects, the victim, the murderer, the detectives...) The main plot is satisfying and clever, as are the subplots and the resolution. The book provides a brilliant introduction to both Poirot and Hastings. So why haven't I rated this one as Top Notch? Well - and this is a purely personal thing - in the Top Notch Christie novels (and I'm obviously nitpicking because I think all Christie's books are ace), the different strands seem to combine and interweave to form a coherent and brilliant ending. Here, there are many, many clever details/flourishes, but I felt as if the various impressive elements remained somehow unmerged. Crucially, there isn't a particular link between the clever 'whodunit' and the clever 'howdunit' that would have made this book Top Notch for me. The 'who' element works very well conceptually but on this occasion I felt I needed to know a little more under the heading of 'Murderer Psychology and Relationships'. Christie reuses the same 'who' solution in a later novel, where there are no leftover questions: everything is brilliantly revealed and imaginable. It almost feels as if Christie wanted to try that particular 'who' answer again to realise it more fully. Weirdly, I don't think this is the best Poirot to start with, despite it being the first.

The Murder on the Links (1923)

An urgent cry for help brings Poirot to France. But he arrives too late to save his client, whose brutally stabbed body now lies face downwards in a shallow grave on a golf course. But why is the dead man wearing his son's overcoat? And who was the impassioned love-letter in the pocket for? Before Poirot can answer these questions, the case is turned upside down by the discovery of a second, identically murdered corpse.

Rating: Solid.

This novel has a great story and many satisfying and surprising elements - not least Poirot's competition with a French policeman about who can solve the mystery first. Poirot and Hastings travel to France to solve this puzzle, and the setting and atmosphere work very well. In many ways, it's a brilliant and ambitious story. This gets a Solid rather than Excellent rating for three reasons: 1) There's an aspect of the plot that, even after reading the book several times, I don't quite get. I'm sure I could get it if I made notes and concentrated a bit harder...but for me, in the very best Poirot and Christie novels, everything falls into place during the denouement scene. I found that the denouement of this novel left some odd bits sticking out, resulting in a handful of 'But what about...?' questions. The fault is undoubtedly mine, but it meant that I didn't get that 'Ah, yes, now I see it all' feeling. I also had a sense, while reading, that Christie didn't enjoy writing this as much as *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. With Christie novels, I find, the ones where you can sense that she loved writing them are often the best and most enjoyable. Finally, there's an interaction between a present and past storyline in this book that doesn't entirely work for me. I think it's because the past storyline is expected to carry too much weight, somehow, rather than the two feeling as if they're equally weighted. The present storyline feels a little swamped by the past one.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926)

Known for its startling reveal, this is the book that changed Agatha Christie's career. Roger Ackroyd was a man who knew too much. He knew the woman he loved had poisoned her first husband. He knew someone was blackmailing her - and now he knew she had taken her own life with a drug overdose. Soon the evening post would let him know who the mystery blackmailer was. But Ackroyd was dead before he'd finished reading it - stabbed through the neck where he sat in the study.

Rating: Excellent.

Surprisingly, I'd rate this as Excellent rather than Top Notch. I love the clever whodunit reveal and the ingenious subtle but present clue-planting that paves the way for that reveal, all of which is miles ahead of its time - and the characters, setting and overall tone of the novel impressed me hugely, but I didn't have that feeling of 'I'm really loving reading this' that is required for a Top Notch rating. It wouldn't be in my top ten Poirot novels, for example, although in any list of clever solutions and sleights of hand, it certainly would be. I wonder if perhaps the issue here is that every time I read this novel apart from the first time, I knew the clever solution already, and much of the greatness of this novel lies in its solution. The overall-reading-experience-until-you-reach-the-solution cannot quite compete with the superb ending/revelation. Those Christie and Poirot novels to which I've given a Top Notch rating are the ones that are a joy to read on a page-by-page level, as well as having brilliant resolutions.

The Big Four (1927)

Framed in the doorway of Poirot's bedroom stood an uninvited guest, coated from head to foot in dust. The man's gaunt face stared for a moment, then he swayed and fell. Who was he? Was he suffering from shock or just exhaustion? Above all, what was the significance of the figure 4, scribbled over and over again on a sheet of paper? Poirot finds himself plunged into a world of international intrigue, risking his life to uncover the truth about 'Number Four'.

Rating: Flawed.

This book is flawed for me more because of my personal reading tastes than because of the book itself. I love Christie most when she's writing puzzle-based mystery novels. I found *The Big Four* too much of an 'international intrigue' story, and also a bit less novel-like than most of her other Poirots. It has the feeling of being linked short stories rather than a novel. It does, however, contain some amazing details and plot points - so no Christie or Poirot fan should miss it.

The Mystery of the Blue Train (1928)

Aboard the luxurious Blue Train running from London to the Riviera, pampered millionaire's daughter Ruth Kettering is murdered, her expensive jewels stolen. But Poirot is at hand to solve the case.

Rating: Flawed.

Christie really wasn't keen on this one herself, which makes me feel less guilty for my feelings about it. First of all, it starts with shenanigans about jewellery selling and theft. Like international intrigue of a spy-ish kind, jewel theft is something I cannot persuade myself to care about, ever. I am doomed never to love any story with a missing stash of diamonds at its centre. There are some great elements in this book - such as the relationship between Ruth Kettering and her unsavoury husband, and Katherine Gray who travels alone and with whom Poirot has some fascinating conversations about solving murders - but I really sensed that Christie found writing this novel a chore, and I felt markedly less desperate to solve the mystery in this one than in nearly all of her other books.

The 1930s



Peril at End House (1932)

Nick Buckley was an unusual name for a pretty young woman. But then she had led an unusual life. First, on a treacherous Cornish hillside, the brakes on her car failed. Then, on a coastal path, a falling boulder missed her by inches. Later, an oil painting fell and almost crushed her in bed. Upon discovering a bullet-hole in Nick's sun hat, Hercule Poirot decides the girl needs his protection. At the same time, he begins to unravel the mystery of a murder that hasn't been committed. Yet.

Rating: Excellent.

Tip: A good one to start with

A wonderful setting, fantastic cast of characters, great mystery and perfect tone. I felt as if Christie must have loved writing this one. It feels really 'on form' (perhaps because she hadn't written a Poirot novel in four years, and so had returned to the character feeling refreshed?) The puzzle is properly suspenseful. There's only one reason I didn't classify this one as Top Notch: one particular clue made it a little too easy for me to guess a significant part of the solution to the mystery. My favourite, Top Notch Christies are the ones that I feel are so clever, they're unguessable - despite all the clues being fully present and visible. *Peril at End House* is a fantastic 'classic Christie country house mystery'. It's a good one to start with, I think - it shows Poirot and Hastings doing their stuff brilliantly.

Lord Edgware Dies (1933) also published as Thirteen at Dinner

Poirot had been present when Jane bragged of her plan to 'get rid of' her estranged husband. Now the monstrous man was dead. And yet the great Belgian detective couldn't help feeling that he was being taken for a ride. After all, how could Jane have stabbed Lord Edgware to death in his library at exactly the same time she was seen dining with friends? And what could be her motive now that the aristocrat had finally granted her a divorce?

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: This one has the best murderer, but one of the most complex plots, so read a few others first to build up to it.

A dark, menacing novel with an amazing atmosphere and some great characters. The murderer is a contender for the best killer in all of Christie. I loved and hated this character so much - loved them as a fictional creation while hating them as a person. I found the solution totally unguessable, and there was something unusually resonant about this book. Scenes and moments from it, as well as its atmosphere, stayed with me for a long time after I finished reading. Some characters who are barely present in the book nevertheless make a big impression, and the clues are planted, handled and analysed in amazingly clever ways. I totally love this book - but wouldn't recommend starting here because it is one of the most complex and labyrinthine Poirot novels - you need to work up to it!

Murder on the Orient Express (1934) also published as Murder in the Calais Coach

Murder on the Orient Express is undoubtedly one of Agatha Christie's greatest mystery novels. Just after midnight, a snowdrift stops the Orient Express in its tracks. The luxurious train is surprisingly full for the time of the year, but by the morning it is one passenger fewer. An American tycoon lies dead in his compartment, stabbed a dozen times, his door locked from the inside. Isolated and with a killer in their midst, detective Hercule Poirot must identify the murderer - in case he or she decides to strike again.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tips: The cleverest solution in all of crime fiction, but don't read it first or last.

I reread this book after seeing the recent movie adaptation. It was my fifth reread of this classic Christie novel, which seems to get better every time. It's so detailed: meticulous and almost pedantic in its treatment of plot, but not boring for a second. The structure is incredibly satisfying, and even the contents page is a thing of great beauty and elegance. The book features the cleverest solution in all of crime fiction, and shows Christie absolutely at the top of her game. Read this one after reading maybe three or four other Poirots first, though. I think the best should neither be first nor last on any reading list, just as you wouldn't put best track first on an album.

Three Act Tragedy (1935) also published as Murder in Three Acts

At an apparently respectable dinner party, a vicar is the first to die... Thirteen guests arrived at dinner at the actor's house. It was to be a particularly unlucky evening for the mild-mannered Reverend Stephen Babbington, who choked on his cocktail, went into convulsions and died. But when his martini glass was sent for chemical analysis, there was no trace of poison – just as Poirot had predicted. Even more troubling for the great detective, there was absolutely no motive.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: This one is vastly underrated.

I would absolutely rate *Three Act Tragedy* as Top Notch, although it's rarely recognised as such. There are three murders, two of which have seriously ingenious concepts behind them. One of Christie's key strengths is her ingenuity, and this book has ingenuity in abundance. I love everything about it – the characters, the way the plot unfolds, the multiple locations – but most of all I love those two ingenious ideas that inform two out of the three murders. A vastly underrated Poirot novel.

Death in the Clouds (1935) also published as Death in the Air

From seat No.9, Hercule Poirot was ideally placed to observe his fellow air passengers. Over to his right sat a pretty young woman, clearly infatuated with the man opposite; ahead, in seat No.13, sat a Countess with a poorly-concealed cocaine habit; across the gangway in seat No.8, a detective writer was being troubled by an aggressive wasp. What Poirot did not yet realize was that behind him, in seat No.2, sat the slumped, lifeless body of a woman.

Rating: Solid.

This novel does everything right. It's very good. So why is it not excellent? It's hard to say, really. I can't fault it on any level, but I like it rather than love it. When reading *Death in the Clouds*, I didn't turn the pages quite so addictively as I normally do. There is, however, much to enjoy about it. There's a question Poirot keeps asking about the passengers' luggage on the plane, and when we find out why he's asking that question, it's incredibly satisfying. Also, something that normally signifies one thing in a Christie novel – and that therefore the reader thinks she can assume -- is wonderfully turned on its head to provide a brilliant surprise. I think part of the reason this book didn't make it to Excellent, for me, is that the character of the murder victim remained oddly opaque throughout -- I didn't feel I ever had a proper sense of who, precisely, had been murdered, beyond the basic facts of name and biographical details.

The A.B.C. Murders (1936)

The ABC Murders is a surprising novel tackling the modern figure of the serial killer and the psychology behind it. There's a serial killer on the loose, working his way through the alphabet - and the whole country is in a state of panic. A is for Mrs Ascher in Andover, B is for Betty Barnard in Bexhill, C is for Sir Carmichael Clarke in Churston. With each murder, the killer is getting more confident – but leaving a trail of deliberate clues to taunt the proud Hercule Poirot might just prove to be the first, and fatal mistake.

Rating: Excellent.

Tip: One of the most fun of all Christie's novels

An ingenious set-up and a stunning, high-concept solution. I found *The ABC Murders* to be one of the most fun of all Christie's novels to read, and it's clear she loved writing it. One quibble prevents it, for me, from being

Top Notch. Some of the book is written from the point of view of a different, non-series character, while the rest is narrated by Captain Hastings. The parts not narrated by Hastings have, for me, a narrative perspective that doesn't sit well with Hastings' surrounding narrative. This gave the book a feeling of not quite gelling – but, minor quibbles aside, the book is still excellent and almost Top Notch. Most people would certainly list it in their top five Poirots, I think.

Murder in Mesopotamia (1936)

When Amy Leatheran travels to an ancient site in the Iraqi desert to nurse the wife of a celebrated archaeologist, events prove stranger than she has ever imagined. Her patient's bizarre visions and nervous terror seem unfounded, but as the oppressive tension in the air thickens, events come to a terrible climax – in murder. With one spot of blood as his only clue, Hercule Poirot must embark on a journey across the desert to unravel a mystery which taxes even his remarkable powers.

Rating: Excellent.

Tip: One of the most enjoyable overall reading experiences with the best murder victim.

Amazingly gripping, brilliantly written, with great atmosphere and a strong sense of place. The narrator, Nurse Amy Leatheran, has a wonderful, engaging and consistent voice, and the characterisation is fantastic, particularly of the central murder victim. Just as *Lord Edgware Dies* boasts the best murderer, and *Murder on the Orient Express* has the best solution, this novel has the best murder victim. The solution of 'howdunit' is ingenious and unguessable, but there's a problem with this book that brought it down from a Top Notch rating for me: the 'whodunit' element. I wanted to find a way to think it was okay, and plausible, and that this might conceivably happen, but I couldn't convince myself. Ultimately, I just couldn't believe that the murderer turned out to be the person the book told me it was (you'll know what I mean when you read it - which you absolutely should because it is in every other way one of the best. It's certainly one of the most enjoyable overall reading experiences.)

Cards on the Table (1936)

A flamboyant party host is murdered in full view of a roomful of bridge players... Mr Shaitana was famous as a flamboyant party host. Nevertheless, he was a man of whom everybody was a little afraid. So, when he boasted to Poirot that he considered murder an art form, the detective had some reservations about accepting a party invitation to view Shaitana's private collection. Indeed, what began as an absorbing evening of bridge was to turn into a more dangerous game altogether...

Rating: Solid.

I feel about this one almost exactly as I do about *Death in the Clouds*. Christie doesn't put a foot wrong here, but for some reason I didn't love it. I wonder if maybe she didn't enjoy writing it. The book had a slightly claustrophobic feel that I found slightly oppressive – and, weirdly, this wasn't relieved when the action moved away from the bridge table and headed off for other locations. However, I did love the way Poirot worked everything out based on the suspects' approaches to bridge playing - that was very clever.

Dumb Witness (1937) also published as Poirot Loses a Client

An elderly spinster has been poisoned in her country home. Everyone blamed Emily's accident on a rubber ball left on the stairs by her frisky terrier. But the more she thought about her fall, the more convinced she became that one of her relatives was trying to kill her. On April 17th she wrote her suspicions in a letter to Hercule Poirot. Mysteriously he

didn't receive the letter until June 28th... by which time Emily was already dead.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: Includes a wonderful dog, based on Christie's own dog.

I really loved this one, for two reasons. One was that the overall reading experience was amazingly enjoyable, with every page feeling like a treat. I loved the characters, the set-up, the mystery, and the solution. *Dumb Witness* also includes a wonderful dog, Bob, who must, I think, have been based on Christie's beloved dog Peter, to whom the book is dedicated. *Dumb Witness* is one of those Christies that feels like a great novel about people as well as a gripping mystery, and it showcases Christie's deep understanding of human psychology and human nature.

Death on the Nile (1937)

The tranquillity of a cruise along the Nile was shattered by the discovery that Linnet Ridgeway had been shot through the head. She was young, stylish and beautiful. A girl who had everything...until she lost her life. Hercule Poirot recalled an earlier outburst by a fellow passenger: 'I'd like to put my dear little pistol against her head and just press the trigger.' Yet in this exotic setting nothing was ever quite what it seemed.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: Don't miss this true all rounder!

Death on the Nile is a flawless work of genius, which works brilliantly on every level. A true all-rounder. Setting, tone, plot, characters, clues...all are perfect. This is one to be savoured after reading perhaps ten or twelve other Poirot books first, I think. It's an after-dinner cocktail of a Poirot novel, not a starter. A sundowner! It contains one of my favourite Christie tropes: the angry young socialist/revolutionary man who is clearly being a Very Silly Boy and will obviously get over himself and his Big Ideas as soon as he has the love of a good woman to sort him out.

Appointment with Death (1938)

Among the towering red cliffs of Petra, like some monstrous swollen Buddha, sat the corpse of Mrs Boynton. A tiny puncture mark on her wrist was the only sign of the fatal injection that had killed her. With only 24 hours available to solve the mystery, Hercule Poirot recalled a chance remark he'd overheard back in Jerusalem: 'You see, don't you, that she's got to be killed?' Mrs Boynton was, indeed, the most detestable woman he'd ever met.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: Meet Christie's most scary, dysfunctional family!

Appointment with Death contains the best and scariest dysfunctional family in all of Christie. It combines a clever plot with a wonderful setting and characters. Agatha Christie's interest in and passion for travel shines through in her more exotically-set books like this one, and she seems to write these stories with particular enthusiasm. I was going to mark this one down to Excellent because the solution doesn't feel entirely tied-in to the rest of what matters in the story...but then I decided that, for me, the book nevertheless works brilliantly. It's an unusual choice of who and why, given what has gone before, but it somehow feels right all the same. In this novel, Christie reveals a deep understanding of psychological manipulation and control. Dr Sarah King is also a great protagonist.

Hercule Poirot's Christmas (1938) also published as Murder for Christmas and as A Holiday for Murder

It is Christmas Eve. The Lee family reunion is shattered by a deafening crash of furniture, followed by a high-pitched wailing scream. Upstairs, the tyrannical Simeon Lee lies dead in a pool of blood, his throat slashed. But when Hercule Poirot, who is staying in the village with a friend for Christmas, offers to assist, he finds an atmosphere not of mourning but of mutual suspicion. It seems everyone had their own reason to hate the old man.

Rating: Excellent.

Great clues, a pleasing set of characters and a superb setting. This book loses points for one reason only: the identity of the murderer, when revealed, was disappointing to me. I don't know why this felt like a big disappointment when a similar quibble didn't trouble me in *Appointment with Death*. However, unlike in that novel, my reaction here was 'Oh – really?' It felt not-ideal, in a way that the solution to *Appointment With Death* didn't. Hercule Poirot's Christmas's solution is brilliantly and cleverly done, but I felt as if the murderer turned out to be a character the narrative hadn't previously seemed all that interested in, in a way that slightly detracted from my overall enjoyment of the book.

1940s



Sad Cypress (1940)

An elderly stroke victim dies without having arranged a will. Beautiful young Elinor Carlisle stood serenely in the dock, accused of the murder of Mary Gerrard, her rival in love. The evidence was damning: only Elinor had the motive, the opportunity and the means to administer the fatal poison. Yet, inside the hostile courtroom, only one man still presumed Elinor was innocent until proven guilty: Hercule Poirot was all that stood between Elinor and the gallows.

Rating: Excellent.

I love the characters and their relationships, and, in particular, the exploration and analysis of loving someone too much when they don't love you back in quite the same way. Elinor Carlisle is a wonderful protagonist – she really makes the book, and we care about the way things turn out for her. The plot and clues all work very well. Agatha Christie cared about this story, and about Elinor in particular, and that makes the reader care too. Elinor has a particularly interesting attitude to being accused of murder, and her psychology when she is accused and on trial is handled so movingly and convincingly that the whole thing feels very real.

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe (1940) also published as Overdose of Death and as The Patriotic Murders

The dentist was found with a blackened hole below his right temple. A pistol lay on the floor near his outflung right hand. Later, one of his patients was found dead from a lethal dose of local anaesthetic. A clear case of murder and suicide. But why would a dentist commit a crime in the middle of a busy day of appointments? A shoe buckle holds the

key to the mystery. Now – in the words of the rhyme – can Poirot pick up the sticks and lay them straight?

Rating: Solid.

I really enjoyed *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*. It's huge fun, with numerous entertaining elements, not least the opening scene in which Poirot reveals himself to be scared of visits to the dentist. There's an interesting and unusual element to the solution to the mystery, involving a fascinating character. The reason I'd rate this as Solid and not Excellent is mainly because I found it to be one of the more forgettable Christies. Its details don't lodge forever in your memory, as with the best Christies. It has a slightly more transient feel to it - while still being thoroughly enjoyable.

Evil Under the Sun (1941)

It was not unusual to find the beautiful bronzed body of the sun-loving Arlena Stuart stretched out on a beach, face down. Only, on this occasion, there was no sun... she had been strangled. Ever since Arlena's arrival at the resort, Hercule Poirot had detected sexual tension in the seaside air. But could this apparent 'crime of passion' have been something more evil and premeditated altogether?

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: Christie at her finest – truly ingenious

An ingenious puzzle, a splendid cast of characters and a wonderful set-up. Christie utilises the holiday hotel-on-the-beach setting for plot purposes amazingly well. The resort is populated with memorable major and minor characters - in particular, there is a hilarious American couple that I loved. The murder plot is truly ingenious. *Evil Under the Sun* is a high concept mystery, taking one of crime fiction's staples – relating to the precise way in which some murderers lie – and altering it in one crucial respect to produce something highly unusual. Christie is at her finest when taking something mundane and making it turn out to be highly significant, simply by dint of its mundanity. The book also provides an interesting insight into the way the world views and treats really beautiful women. This a perfect Christie novel: page by page, it's a joy to read, and as puzzle-based murder mystery, it's exemplary on every level. One of the top five Christies of all time, I think.

Five Little Pigs (1942) also published as Murder in Retrospect

Beautiful Caroline Crale was convicted of poisoning her husband, yet there were five other suspects: Philip Blake (the stockbroker) who went to market; Meredith Blake (the amateur herbalist) who stayed at home; Elsa Greer (the three-time divorcee) who had roast beef; Cecilia Williams (the devoted governess) who had none; and Angela Warren (the disfigured sister) who cried 'wee wee wee' all the way home. It is sixteen years later, but Hercule Poirot just can't get that nursery rhyme out of his mind.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: A novel and mystery masterpiece

Five Little Pigs has an unusual structure but it's an absolute masterpiece - both as a novel and as a mystery. It's confident, mature, satisfying, and all elements within it are perfectly balanced. It is also the personal favourite of John Curran, author of the unmissable *Agatha Christie's Complete Secret Notebooks* – an invaluable resource for any Christie fan. This one is one to save, I think, until you've read nearly all the other Poirot novels Christie wrote. I wouldn't want to read this one too soon, as it seems in many ways to be a sort of culmination of everything that has gone before. It's definitely Christie at her best.

The Hollow (1946) also published as Murder after Hours

Lucy Angkatell invited Hercule Poirot to lunch. To tease the great detective, her guests stage a mock murder beside the swimming pool. Unfortunately, the victim plays the scene for real. As his blood drips into the water, John Christow gasps one final word: 'Henrietta'. In the confusion, a gun sinks to the bottom of the pool. Poirot's enquiries reveal a complex web of romantic attachments. It seems everyone in the drama is a suspect – and each a victim of love.

Rating Top Notch.

Tip: My personal favourite due to its psychological insights

The Hollow is my current personal favourite Poirot novel, and Christie novel. It contains a lot of insight into the minds of those obsessed by their vocations and determined to do their thing at all costs, whether that thing happens to be medicine or sculpting. The characters are vivid, the book is a joy to read on a page-by-page level, and the murderer is wonderfully horrible and plausible. There was an easier way and a more challenging way in which Christie might have made that character the murderer, and, pleasingly, she went for the more interesting way. Poirot, according to Christie, shouldn't have been in this book, but he is, and he is a brilliant part of it. I'm very glad he's there! The swimming pool scene, in which he first sees the murder and thinks it is a fake that has been staged purely to entertain and fool him, is so vivid and resonant. This novel is a masterpiece, which a very unusual (for Poirot) style of denouement.

Taken at the Flood (1948) also published as There Is a Tide

A few weeks after marrying an attractive young widow, Gordon Cloade is tragically killed by a bomb blast in the London blitz. Overnight, the former Mrs Underhay finds herself in sole possession of the Cloade family fortune. Shortly afterwards, Hercule Poirot receives a visit from the dead man's sister-in-law who claims she has been warned by 'spirits' that Mrs Underhay's first husband is still alive. Poirot has his suspicions when he is asked to find a missing person guided only by the spirit world. Yet what mystifies Poirot most is the woman's true motive for approaching him.

Rating: Excellent.

Tip: A shocking final scene!

Taken at the Flood is a suprising novel, mainly about a convincingly awful family of the sort that Christie is so good at creating. It's superbly plotted with a shocking final scene that has more to do with the characters' romantic relationships than with the murder plot, and that works very well. This isn't a particularly high-concept story, but there's a wonderful plot surprise towards the end that I didn't even consider as a possibility, which works very well.

1950s



Mrs McGinty's Dead (1952) also published as Blood Will Tell

'Mrs McGinty's dead!' 'How did she die?' 'Down on one knee, just like I!' The old children's game now seemed rather

tasteless. The real Mrs McGinty was killed by a crushing blow to the back of the head and her pitifully small savings were stolen. Suspicion falls immediately on her lodger, hard up and out of a job. Hercule Poirot has other ideas – unaware that his own life is now in great danger.

Rating: Solid.

I love the idea of putting Poirot in a chaotic guesthouse in the fictional town of Broadhinny. It's great to read about his attempts to live in a Poirot-ish, meticulous, neat-and-tidy way despite his landlady's slovenliness. I also love the idea of a man accused of murder who seems absolutely resigned to his fate - to the point where it doesn't even occur to him to try to protest his innocence. All of this is excellent, unusual within Christie's oeuvre, and very well done. For me, however, there's a structural problem with this novel: at a certain point, Poirot has to look into various stories of things that have happened in the past, one after another, and this diluted present storyline a bit. Also, the details of the past stuff came slightly too thick and fast, so that each past story did not stand out distinctly enough from the others. It gave the novel a slightly bitty feel. Otherwise, I would have rated this book Excellent.

After the Funeral (1953) also published as Funerals are Fatal

The master of a Victorian mansion dies suddenly – and his sister is convinced it was murder... When Cora is savagely murdered with a hatchet, the extraordinary remark she made the previous day at her brother Richard's funeral suddenly takes on a chilling significance. At the reading of Richard's will, Cora was clearly heard to say: 'It's been hushed up very nicely, hasn't it...But he was murdered, wasn't he?' In desperation, the family solicitor turns to Hercule Poirot to unravel the mystery.

Rating: Top Notch.

Tip: Used to be my favourite and possibly a better novel than my current favourite.

After the Funeral is perfectly balanced and structured. Poirot only comes into it halfway through, but this works brilliantly. It contains one of the best dysfunctional families in fiction (though not as evil a dysfunction as in *Appointment with Death*). We meet the whole extended family long before Poirot appears, and we marvel at their self-deceptions and delusions. The plot premise is amazing, and there are clear, visible clues that somehow one doesn't spot until they are revealed. Then everything rearranges itself so it's all clear. Objectively, *After the Funeral* is possibly a better novel than my current favourite, *The Hollow*. It was my favourite before *The Hollow*, and maybe it will be again one day, after my next re-read of them all.

Hickory Dickory Dock (1955) also published as Hickory Dickory Death

An outbreak of kleptomania at a student hostel was not normally the sort of crime that aroused Hercule Poirot's interest. But when he saw the list of stolen and vandalized items – including a stethoscope, some old flannel trousers, a box of chocolates, a slashed rucksack and a diamond ring found in a bowl of soup – he congratulated the warden, Mrs Hubbard, on a 'unique and beautiful problem'. The list made absolutely no sense at all. But, reasoned Poirot, if this was merely a petty thief at work, why was everyone at the hostel so frightened?

Rating: Solid.

Hickory Dickory Dock is really enjoyable, and unusual for Christie in that it's set in a youth hostel. It has a more modern feel than some Poirot novels, but - at the same time - a less timeless, ageless feel. It's very much of its period, I think. The setting is vivid, but nothing in this book lifted its rating, for me, to Excellent - though there is one very clever plot device, and the mix of characters in the youth hostel is really well done. Christie

demonstrates here that she can write characters beyond what's thought of as her usual type. One puzzling element of this book for me was the ending did not answer all the questions that it needed to answer. Aspects of the resolution felt a bit shaky and did not make complete sense to me. I was left with several 'But why...?' questions about particular characters' psychology and motivations.

Dead Man's Folly (1956)

A charity murder game at a Devon house turns into the real thing. Sir George and Lady Stubbs, the hosts of a village fête, hit upon the novel idea of staging a mock murder mystery. In good faith, Ariadne Oliver, the well known crime writer, agrees to organise their murder hunt. Despite weeks of meticulous planning, at the last minute Ariadne calls her friend Hercule Poirot for his expert assistance. Instinctively, she senses that something sinister is about to happen... Beware – nobody is quite what they seem!

Rating: Excellent.

Tip: One of Christie's most vibrant and enjoyable books

The setting of *Dead Man's Folly* is based on Christie's holiday home, Greenway, and her love for the place really comes through. The themes of this novel are love for a house, love for one's family and how a house can almost become a member of the family. It's told in a vivid and atmospheric style and Mrs Oliver plays a wonderful part. I also think a boathouse is a great setting for a murder. The solution is satisfying. This is one of Agatha Christie's most vibrant and enjoyable novels.

Cat Among the Pigeons (1959)

Unpleasant things are going on in an exclusive school for girls – things like murder... Late one night, two teachers investigate a mysterious flashing light in the sports pavilion, while the rest of the school sleeps. There, among the lacrosse sticks, they stumble upon the body of the unpopular games mistress – shot through the heart from point blank range. The school is thrown into chaos when the 'cat' strikes again. Unfortunately, schoolgirl Julia Upjohn knows too much. In particular, she knows that without Hercule Poirot's help, she will be the next victim...

Rating: Solid.

A pretty good story, but Poirot hardly features at all, so it doesn't work so well as a Poirot novel. It's very different from *After the Funeral*, which feels very much like a Poirot novel even though he is absent for the first half. The boarding school is absolutely great, and the headmistress's mindset – loyalty to the school and caring about its legacy – comes across very well. This book does 'love of a school' in the same way that *Dead Man's Folly* does 'love for a family home'.

1960s



The Clocks (1963)

As instructed, stenographer Sheila Webb let herself into the house at 19 Wilbraham Crescent. It was then that she made a grisly discovery: the body of a dead man sprawled across the living room floor. What intrigued Poirot about the case was the time factor. Although in a state of shock, Sheila clearly remembered having heard a cuckoo clock strike three o'clock. Yet, the four other clocks in the living room all showed the time as 4.13. Even more strangely, only one of these clocks belonged to the owner of the house.

Rating: Solid.

The plot of *The Clocks* is clever, but I'm not keen on the intermingling of political spy plots and murder mystery puzzle plots, so for me this couldn't quite make the Excellent level. I didn't find this one of Christie's most engaging story, though it is brilliant in one respect: the intriguing plot hook of many clocks in one room that don't belong there, all showing a particular time. That's surreal and spine-chilling in a very Christie-esque way. One of her best talents as a writer is knowing how to hook readers with surreal and almost impossible-seeming scenarios.

Third Girl (1966)

Three young women share a London flat. The first is a coolly efficient personal secretary; the second is an artist; and the third interrupts Hercule Poirot's breakfast of brioche and hot chocolate insisting that she is a murderer – and then promptly disappears. Slowly, Poirot learns of the rumours surrounding the mysterious third girl, her family – and her disappearance. Yet hard evidence is needed before the great detective can pronounce her guilty, innocent or insane...

Rating: Excellent.

I've rated this excellent, although the book is certainly flawed. However, I couldn't rate it Flawed because I so loved the experience of reading it, and that for me is the main measure of a book's success. The mystery and suspense worked really well here – I was desperate to know who committed the murder, how and why. The atmosphere is almost chillingly mysterious. Christie writes with great sensitivity and wit about Poirot feeling and being old in a slightly odd (to him) modern world. Mrs Oliver plays a very good role in this story, too.

Hallowe'en Party (1969)

At a Hallowe'en party, Joyce – a hostile thirteen-year-old – boasts that she once witnessed a murder. When no-one believes her, she storms off home. But within hours her body is found, still in the house, drowned in an apple-bobbing tub. That night, Hercule Poirot is called in to find the 'evil presence'. But first he must establish whether he is looking for a murderer or a double-murderer.

Rating: Solid.

Hallowe'en Party has a great set-up, but the ending feels somehow detached from what has gone before it. The various components of the story do not feel entirely integrated. Some very clever clues are planted, in a way that means readers won't notice them, and this works very well at the moment of revelation. My main issue with this novel is that, when I reached the solution, it somehow felt as if it didn't sufficiently relate to everything that had gone before it.

1970s



Elephants Can Remember (1972)

Hercule Poirot stood on the cliff-top. For here, many years earlier, there had been a tragic accident – the broken body of a woman was discovered on the rocks at the foot of the cliff. This was followed by the grisly discovery of two more bodies – a husband and wife – shot dead. But who had killed whom? Was it a suicide pact? A crime of passion? Or cold-blooded murder? Poirot delves back into a crime committed 15 years earlier and discovers that, when there is a distinct lack of physical evidence, it's just as well that 'old sins leave long shadows.'

Rating Flawed.

This book contains a clever mystery with an impressively clever solution, but the bulk of the novel is Mrs Oliver chatting to people in a way that's not always clear or relevant. This is a novel that Christie wrote very late in life, and, despite its flawed structure, it's highly enjoyable to read, especially if you love Mrs Oliver!

Curtain: Poirot's Last Case (written about 1940, published 1975)

Poirot and Hastings come full circle at Styles. Now wheelchair bound, there is still one case for Poirot to solve. Who is the serial killer X?

Rating: Flawed.

Tip: Brilliant, but fatally flawed!

Curtain is an absolutely brilliant crime novel - but it's fatally flawed for me because of what happens to Poirot in it, and what Poirot himself does in it. For anyone who does not object to those two particular elements, you might well think *Curtain* is one of the very best Poirots.