

Death on the Nile by Agatha Christie

What made me choose 'Death on the Nile' was that it is a typical Christie novel and I wanted to focus on two things. Why has the English country house novel endured; and how did a second rank writer like Christie create characters which rise far above the level of the novels in which they live, and populate the public imagination?

First - the endurance of the country house novel. Christie wrote 38 novels and 65 short stories. 'Death on the Nile' was written at the height of her popularity in 1939. She introduces us in the first 30 pages to all the dozen or so characters – Poirot, himself, and Colonel Race, who serves as an assistant in solving the mystery, but in such a way as to flatter Poirot's "little grey cells".

The main murder victim is Linnett Ridgeway, "the richest girl in England". There is also her friend Jacqueline de Bellefort; and the man Linnett steals from Jacqueline and marries, Simon Doyle.

It is usually said that Christie can only create cardboard characters. This is broadly true, since they all serve to form part of the puzzle that has to be solved. But she is skilful at giving them each enough life to make them potential suspects with a motive for murder. And she can do more than that – for example, Cordelia, the plain Jane, who is brighter and more sensible than others think, comes alive on the page.

Once on the boat, she moves the story on rapidly with an absorbing series of murders – that of Linnett herself, and two others who we find have to be eliminated as otherwise they would give the game away.

On the night of the murder, Jacqueline argues with Simon and shoots him in the leg. The gun disappears. Jacqueline, in a state of shock, is sedated. Linnett is found by Poirot murdered with a J scrawled in blood beside her and her necklace is missing.

There are clues aplenty – rosary, nail polish and a velvet shawl. But halfway through, in case you are not keeping up, we are given a memorandum by Colonel Race summing up the key facts so far.

Then comes the classic Christie denouement, with the gathering of the survivors together to reveal the arch-criminal. And if you aren't familiar with the book or film, the ending will come as a surprise to you.

This is the kind of novel from the golden age of English crime fiction presided over by Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Ngaio Marsh. Some critics dismissed this particular genre with contempt. Edmond Wilson wrote an essay in 1943 entitled "Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?"

Subsequently, in 1946, George Orwell published 'The Decline of the English Murder', an essay which both charts and laments the demise of a specific kind of criminal: the English gentleman-murderer, who commits his crimes in a domestic, often suburban setting.

But the truth is that the classic country house novel has continued to be read and thrive in the hands of authors like P. D. James. These novels all present an enclosed and hierarchically ordered society in which everyone knows their place and role. This order is shattered by a murder. The detective - professional or amateur – arrives on the scene and solves the puzzle. The murderer is unmasked and order is restored.

There is another kind of mystery here – how secondary writers like Christie can create a character who enters into and remains in the public imagination. It is one thing for a major author to do this with unforgettable characters like Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist and Beccy Sharp.

But what about immortal characters by lesser writers who produced at best what Orwell called “good bad books” – Frankenstein, Sherlock Holmes, Dracula, Svengali and Bond, for example.

Christie left us with two – Miss Marple and Poirot. How did she do it? After all Poirot seems like a character created from mother’s dressing up box as a stage foreigner:

- Dapper, fastidious – “I like an audience. I am vain. I am puffed up with conceit. I like to say :See how clever Poirot is” ...
- “I am constantly in the habit of being bright”.
- A lover of symmetry, order, cleanliness, good food and fine wine.
- Courteous but impatient when in pursuit.
- A stock foreigner who eloquently mangles stock English phrases, hates the outdoors and adores central heating.
- Above all, a thinker who solves problems by using “his little grey cells”.

Of course, it is true that film and TV have extended the life of these larger than life characters. It would be difficult for the middle-aged to see anyone but David Suchet. Good actors can give a depth to this type of literary creation that the authors could not.