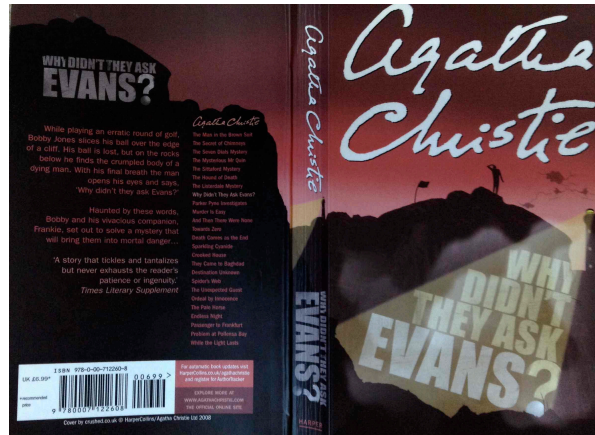


Why didn't they ask Evans? 1934

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

'Little things interest me' says Dr Nicholson and he immediately grills Lady Frances Derwent about her car accident. The 'little thing' that Dr Nicholson had noticed was that the car of the doctor who had stopped to help at the accident had been facing the wrong way. Lady Frances is uncomfortable. The accident had been staged and the doctor was an accomplice. 'You sound like a detective' says Mrs Nicholson to her husband after he has finished his cross-questioning. 'Little things interest me' he says again. Dr Nicholson is not the detective. Indeed he is a principal suspect. But in his use of his little grey cells he resembles Poirot more closely than any other character in the novel.



The detective in fact is Lady Frances – known as Frankie – assisted by Bobby, the fourth son of the Vicar of Marchbolt in Wales. *Why didn't they ask Evans* is one of Christie's adventure stories. We are in the world of Tommy and Tuppence rather than of Poirot or Marple.

In these first dozen or so years of her writing career there are two rather different types of novel that Christie published under her own name. There are the whodunnits for which she is famous, and the adventure stories. There is a simple rule of thumb that helps you identify early on which type of novel you are reading. If the central character is a feisty young woman, probably with a decent but less intelligent young man in tow, then you are reading one of the adventure stories. If the central character is elderly, and probably called Poirot, you are reading a whodunnit. This rule is not perfect. *The Sittaford Mystery* is a whodunnit, but the detective is a feisty young woman. *The Big Four* is an adventure story despite the fact that the central character is called Hercule Poirot. Whether this is the same Hercule Poirot who appears in so many of Christie's whodunnits is doubtful. His character in *The Big Four* seems altogether different. It is like comparing the Falstaff of the *Merry Wives* with the Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays.

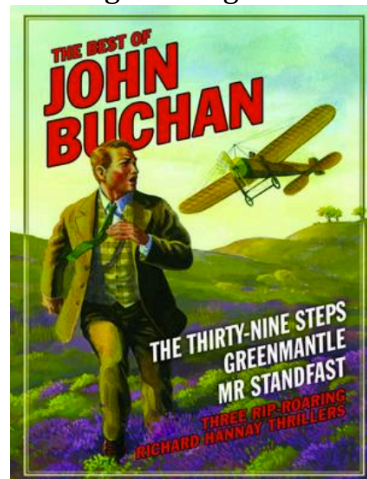
The two types of novel – the whodunnits and the adventure stories – share some features. There are one or more murders, and the reader will puzzle over who the murderer is. There is Christie's style, and her humour, common to the two types of novel. The murders, the puzzles and the clues, however, play different roles and relate to the narrative in different ways. In the whodunnits the narrative drive is focussed on solving the puzzle: who committed the murder(s),

how and why? In these novels there is a clear point near the end when all the clues are in and readers can stop and try to solve the puzzle themselves. The solution is then revealed, normally by the detective although occasionally through some other mechanism such as a confessional letter. Typically in Christie's whodunnits the detective and his or her friends are never in physical danger, and there is little physical action. The action is cerebral – the intellectual solving of the problem. Finally, there are many suspects and several clues.

In the adventure stories the puzzles create reasons for the characters to act and lead them into adventures. The function of the puzzles is to provide the characters with a desire to get to the bottom of what is going on, rather than to motivate the reader. The motivation for the reader is to enjoy the adventure.

In the adventure novels there is no clear point for the reader to stop and solve the puzzle. Indeed the solution may be revealed before the end of the story in order to provide a scene where the reader knows that the main characters (the 'goodies') are in danger. In some of the adventure stories the puzzle is more the question 'who is Mr Big?' – where Mr Big is the arch villain – than who is the murderer – although of course Mr Big will be the power behind the murders. In contrast with the whodunnits the central characters are in danger at one or more points. And because solving the puzzle is not the central issue there tend to be fewer possible suspects and fewer clues.

Although these two types of novel can generally be distinguished there is a continuum between the genres. Christie's adventure stories contain stronger elements of the whodunnit than most other novelists writing in that genre: Buchan, Dornford Yates, Eric Ambler, Ian Fleming, to give a few examples. Indeed it is possible to read Christie's adventure stories as whodunnits and that is how we read them first time round. Having come upon Christie's adventure stories sporadically we assumed that they were whodunnits. And they were our least favourite because read as whodunnits they are not as good as most of her novels. But now, reading her work in chronological order, we can see that in these early years Christie was experimenting with two different genres.



Suppose that we read *Evans* as a whodunnit. How does it square up?

Bobby finds a man dying, having fallen over a cliff. Just before he dies the man says to Bobby: *Why didn't they ask Evans?* Bobby finds a photo of a beautiful woman in the man's pocket but puts it back. The man's identity is not known so the police arrange for the photo found in the dead man's pocket to be published in the papers. A Mrs Cayman comes forward as the woman in the photo. She identifies the dead man as Alex Pritchard, her brother. At the inquest Bobby is surprised, and rather disappointed, at how different Mrs Cayman looks from the beautiful face in the photo that he had seen. He puts this down to the terrible

effects of age. He writes to Mrs Cayman and her husband telling them of the man's dying words. Shortly afterwards Bobby receives a letter offering him a ridiculously well paid job in far off Buenos Aires, and when he turns this down, there is a failed attempt on his life by poison. It seems that the Caymans must be involved both in the first murder and the attempted murder of Bobby. A few pages after Bobby's brush with death, Bobby sees the photo that was published in the papers and realises that it is not the same as the photo he found in the dead man's pocket. Someone must have swapped the photos and the only person who could have done so is the man who appeared on the scene shortly after Bobby found the dead body and who stayed with the body after Bobby left. That man is Roger Bassington-ffrench. And so Bobby, and his childhood friend, the wealthy Lady Frances Derwent, go off in search of Roger Bassington-ffrench. The staged car accident was in order to gain access to the house of his brother, Henry, where Roger is staying.

By now we are a third of the way through the book. In the course of the second third we learn that the dead man was called Alan Carstairs; we meet the beautiful young woman of the photo - Moira, wife of Dr Nicholson. A few further characters are introduced, but, as a whodunnit the puzzle, it comes down to Dr Nicholson or Roger Bassington-ffrench? There is the issue of how do the Caymans fit in, and whether Sylvia Bassington-ffrench or Moira Nicholson are involved as accomplices, but these are tangential to the main puzzle. The clues are fairly evenly spread between the two main suspects but with one exception. In favour of Dr Nicholson is his interest in the faked car accident; his dark blue Talbot car similar to one seen in the vicinity on the day Bobby was poisoned; and his being on the scene when Henry is shot, although Sylvia would have to be an accomplice. This latter possibility is supported by his being seen holding Sylvia's hands – could they want Henry out of the way so as to pursue their relationship? Finally there is his character: clever, cold, creepy even. In favour of Roger Bassington-ffrench is the fact that only he could have swapped the photos although when confronted with this he admits he did and gives an innocent, and just about plausible, account of why. We learn that Sylvia and Henry's son Tommy fell off a swing, and on a separate occasion almost drowned, and on both occasions Roger was with him. And Roger was at the scene at the time of Henry's murder although he seems to have an alibi.

A 1934 (green) Talbot
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Talbot_105_1934.jpg]



As can be seen, all this is very elusive – suggestive hints but not the hard clues we have come to expect from an Christie whodunnit. They are there to affect readers' emotions rather than their reason. They give readers anxiety – are Frankie and Bobby in danger from this person? Should they be telling that person this information?

There is however one exception – one hard clue – difficult to spot but almost conclusive if you do spot it. Roger says at one point that although there are some

resemblances the dead man did not look like Alan Carstairs. And then, eight chapters later, Roger tells Frankie that he never saw the face of the dead man: "There was a handkerchief spread over it".

The perpetrators turn out to be Roger working with Moira and Moira's gang that includes the 'Caymans'.

Only one good clue, a solution that involves four people, two of whom are minor characters, and only two other suspects (Dr Nicholson and Sylvia). A long way from a classical Christie whodunnit. No, this is best read as an adventure story with some whodunnit elements. The chapter titles help us see this: *An Escape from Death; In the Enemy's Camp; Moira Disappears; On the Track of the Caymans; Nocturnal Adventure; Escape*. Bobby is hit on the head and kidnapped while creeping around the grounds of Dr Nicholson's eerie nursing home carrying his service revolver. Frankie is lured into a trap and is also kidnapped. Both are tied up in the attic of an old house and are about to be killed. All comes right in the end, of course, and Bobbie and Frankie, despite their differences of class, become engaged.

The adventures are strongly reminiscent of Christie's second novel, *The Secret Adversary*. In the end Roger Bassington-Ffrench escapes justice and writes a cheery letter to Frankie from "one of the less well-known South American republics" filling in the details of his crimes and signing off "Your affectionate enemy, the bold, bad villain of the piece": very similar to the ending of *The Man in the Brown Suit*.

In summary: murders, adventure, a tinge of romance, and one clue.

[TH]