

## Murder on the Orient Express

1934

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



*Murder on the Orient Express* was one of the first of Christie's novels I read – or rather my parents read it to me. I was about ten at the time. I had by then travelled twice on family holidays to the South of France from Paris by train, sleeping in a couchette overnight. So exciting. Leaving Paris in the late evening and arriving in Antibes, or Hendaye, at dawn, the heat of the sun beginning to break through the light morning mist. I was fascinated by the woman in the scarlet kimono. The train, the woman, the colour: all very romantic. I thought that she was the key to the mystery, but, of course, she turns out to be a scarlet herring.

In *Orient Express* Christie, the imaginative scientist, is exploring the boundaries of whodunnit solutions. She has done this before and she will do it again. As before her solution is in danger of being considered beyond the pale by some readers and she faces the difficult task of being fair to the reader without making it all too obvious. As before she treads this fine line with consummate skill. *Orient Express* presents her with a further problem: how to make the novel engaging. The nature of the solution makes it desirable that there are many suspects – more than is usually necessary in a whodunnit – and makes it imperative that there is no ambiguity over who these suspects are. It is also important that there are a few characters who are not suspects. In order to meet these requirements Christie opts for an extreme version of the country house murder: the victim, the suspects, and Poirot are confined to one carriage on a train that is stuck in deep snow in the middle of what was then Yugoslavia (or Yugo-Slavia as it is spelt in the novel). This makes for what is potentially too static a story.

So how does Christie make the story – as opposed to the solution – engaging? The answer is that she makes a virtue of necessity. Poirot has to solve the mystery without any help from outside. He has only the testimonies of the suspects, his own knowledge, and his intelligence to draw on - and, despite his protestations to the contrary, a little of the human foxhound. 'It is the psychology I seek, not the fingerprint or the cigarette ash' he says, in order to distance himself from the Holmes of the magnifying glass, but he continues: 'in this case I would welcome a little scientific assistance.' He then proceeds to construct a device for reading a burned letter from the wire netting of an old hat box, a pair of curling tongs and a spirit stove. This provides him with the clue that enables him to crack open the case.

It is not Holmes the seeker of physical clues, however, but Holmes the thinker that Christie draws on to make the narrative interesting. If the action has to be static then

the interest must lie in thinking through the puzzle. The novel is structured in three parts. Their titles make it clear that the reader must concentrate and must think. The first section is called *The Facts*; the second section, *The Evidence*; and the final section *Hercule Poirot Sits Back and Thinks*. This is a novel of the mind. In the first two chapters of the final part Poirot summarises the evidence gained from the thirteen suspects and he poses ten questions. He then says to his two companions – the only significant characters other than Poirot himself who are not suspects: ‘ “From now on, it is all here,” he tapped himself on the forehead. “We have thrashed it all out. The facts are all in front of us – neatly arranged with order and method. ... We know all that can be known – from outside ... Let us all three close our eyes and think ...”’. Fifteen minutes later Poirot has discovered the truth. The reader could also solve the puzzle at this point and be fairly certain that the solution is correct. By the end of the penultimate chapter – just before Poirot reveals all – the reader has overwhelming evidence of the correct solution. Even so, when I first read the novel, I failed to solve it. Reading the novel knowing the solution it seems impossible not to guess correctly. Was the fascination with the woman and the scarlet kimono so powerful? Or are Christie’s skills at misdirection and her judgement about clues just too good?



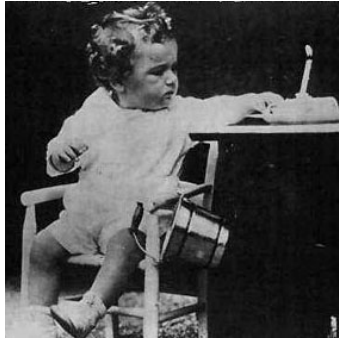
What makes this one of the very best whodunnits is the combination of the originality of the solution and the fact that several clues have to be combined. Many opera composers can write lovely tunes but few can combine several voices into gorgeous harmony. Many crime writers can drop clues that individually point to the solution

but few can compose a structure in which clues must be combined in order to become useful. After Poirot’s fifteen minutes of thinking he imagines the truth. And immediately, on that assumption, he says in the final chapter the whole case fell into beautiful shining order. An astute reader can experience a similar epiphany.

By the beginning of the third part of the novel, when Poirot solves the mystery, we know:

1. That the Stamboul-Calais carriage of the Orient Express is full at a time of year when this is exceptionally unusual.
2. That the victim was stabbed twelve times. Some of the wounds were superficial, some deep, some done left-handed, some right-handed.
3. That almost everyone has an alibi vouched for by someone they, apparently, have never previously met.
4. That the victim, who calls himself Ratchett but whose real name is Cassetti, had been the perpetrator of an infamous crime: the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the three-year-old Daisy Armstrong. Cassetti had been arrested but had been

acquitted on a technicality, Poirot tells us. Daisy Armstrong had been the daughter of a wealthy family with a large household. Both her parents died as a result of her death: her mother through 'shock' and her father from suicide, and a nursemaid who had at first, wrongly, been thought to be implicated in the crime, also killed herself.



Charles Lindberg, the son of the aviator was kidnapped and murdered in 1932. Christie based the case of Daisy Armstrong loosely on this case.  
<http://www.charleslindbergh.com/kidnap/>

There are smaller further clues, such as Colonel Arbuthnot's remark: 'Say what you like, trial by jury is a sound system' ; or Princess Dragomiroff's remark that 'This is Destiny', but too small to play more than a minor confirming role.

By the end of the third part of the book, but before Poirot reveals the solution, we have one further massive clue: that many of the passengers are connected either with the family or with the household of Daisy Armstrong. As yet another passenger is revealed to be connected, the plot seems to be turning to farce. The reader might be thinking that this is getting ridiculous: Christie is relying on absurd coincidence in order to have her range of suspects. Perhaps one reason why readers may fail to see the solution is that the plots of novels, including detective novels, often do rely on excessive coincidence. Readers conclude the book is badly plotted rather than realising that the apparent coincidences are a major clue.

Monsieur Bouc, who plays the Hastings role, says: 'Ma foi. But does everybody on this train tell lies?' and at the beginning of the following chapter he says: 'Even if everybody in the train proved to be in the Armstrong household I should not express surprise.' Poirot responds: 'That is a very profound remark.' Later in the chapter Christie gives us a final prompt, though coupled with a misdirection: 'I don't know how to figure it out', says Mr Hardman. 'They can't all be in it; but which one is the guilty party is beyond me.' Such is Christie's confidence in her skill at masking the solution that she has Poirot say to his companions – and indirectly to the reader: 'It [the solution] is so clear that I wonder you have not seen it also.' And when Hardman asks: 'Which of them was it?' Poirot sets up the denouement that has become a dramatic cliché. 'If you will be so good, M. Hardman, assemble everyone here. There are two possible solutions of this case. I want to lay them both before you all.'

We have suggested, in our blogs on earlier Christie novels, that the best whodunnits should meet the cryptic crossword criterion: that once the reader guesses the correct solution for the right reasons she can be certain of its being correct. *Murder on the Orient Express* meets that criterion. That is not to say that a reader could not come up with possible but wrong solutions. For example Pierre Michel, the wagon-lit conductor, could have been the sole murderer, but this solution would leave so much unexplained that it is not satisfying, and a reader who hit on it would be uncertain that it was correct. On the other hand a reader who came up with the right solution would be certain she had done so. Both *Orient Express* and Christie's earlier novel, *The Sittaford Mystery*, satisfy the cryptic crossword criterion but the style of reasoning required of the reader is different in the two cases. In the case of *Sittaford* it is possible to solve the puzzle through a process of logical reasoning taking a step at a time: a kind of deductive method. In *Orient Express*, if the reader solves it, it will be through a sudden leap of the imagination: a kind of inductive method. *Orient Express* can give one a Eureka moment – if the solution is discovered then, suddenly, everything falls into place.

It is often the case with a good puzzle that the solution is not easy to find but, once seen, it seems so obvious, that the mystery is why it had been difficult to see in the first place. I re-read *Orient Express* knowing the solution. How could I have failed to solve it the first time? One reason is that the solution is very bold. It goes against the assumed conventions of the genre. Those conventions are perhaps less rigid now, to a great extent because of Christie's innovations. A second reason is Christie's skill at misdirection. Christie is trying to prevent the reader from realising that everyone is the murderer. So the question she aims to keep uppermost in the reader's mind is: which of them is the murderer? Indeed, the title to the first chapter of the third part of the book is: Which of them? The last two of the ten questions that Poirot poses to his companions are: 'Can we be sure that Ratchett was stabbed by more than one person?' and, 'What other explanation of his wounds can there be?' Each of these starts the reader wondering whether there might be only one murderer, or at most two. At the end of the second chapter of the third part Poirot says: 'One or more of those passengers killed Ratchett. Which of them?' And just before the denouement Hardman says to Poirot: 'Which of them was it?'

Christie's third device is her use of red herrings. There is a description of a small man with a womanish voice. There is the woman in the scarlet kimono, the dropped pipe cleaner, the cambric handkerchief with the initial H, and the grease stain on the Romanian passport. In short, there are several possible clues each of which leads the reader to be thinking about which individuals are implicated. Not all of these red herrings, it should be said, make sense within the narrative of the plot. Consider the dropped pipe cleaner and the woman with the kimono. These are planted on purpose by the murderers. We are told that this is to complicate matters but this reason does not add up. The crime was plotted so that it would be thought to have been committed by a robber who secretly boarded and left the train. In that case only false clues suggesting such a robber would be helpful. The perpetrators had to adapt their strategy to the situation in which the train was stuck in snow – making it

more difficult, although not impossible, to pin the crime on such a robber. The passengers on the train would come under greater suspicion as a result of the snow. But why place false clues that might implicate specific individuals: Colonel Arbuthnot in the case of the pipe cleaner; one of the wealthier women in the case of the kimono?

There are points of interest in *Orient Express* beyond the puzzle. Christie has a deal of fun with the characters – caricatures perhaps, but none the worse for that. She lampoons the petty minded, somewhat racist, insularity of the British through the character of Colonel Arbuthnot. My favourite, however, is Princess Dragomiroff. ‘Her small toad-like face looked even yellower than the day before. She was certainly ugly, and yet, like the toad, she had eyes like jewels, dark and imperious, revealing latent energy and an intellectual force that could be felt at once.’ Christie not only tells us but shows us. There is a dignity and intelligence in the Princess’ speech that supports the description. Wendy Hiller captures the character rather well in John Guillermin’s patchy 1974 film version of the book.



Wendy Hiller as Princess Dragomiroff  
<http://agathachristiereader.wordpress.com/2011/06/25/orient-express-1974/>

Poirot, and one suspects Christie herself, generally believe that murderers must be prosecuted whatever the reasons for the murder. But in *Orient Express* we see Poirot helping the murderers to get away with it. He distances himself slightly from the decision not to pursue prosecution by setting up a kind of inverse kangaroo court but it is he who is puppet master. The reason for Poirot’s uncharacteristic indulgence seems two-fold: that the victim had committed so dreadful a crime that he deserved to be killed; and that his execution was carried out by a group of twelve people – a kind of jury who act as jury, judge and executioner. But if due process is important to Poirot in the case of Ratchett/Cassetti, as it seems to be, then how can he justify setting due process aside in the case of Ratchett’s murderers? And can we be certain of Cassetti’s guilt? He had been arrested and tried and found not guilty – all by due process in a court in the US. We are told, by Poirot, in one authoritative line that Cassetti was in fact guilty and that his acquittal was on technical grounds and a result of his wealth and hold over certain unnamed people. But Poirot is taking a lot on himself first to find Cassetti guilty when he had been found not guilty by due process, and then to override any proper process at all in pursuing Cassetti’s murderers. All of this is lightly and swiftly dealt with in the novel – in half a page at most. In Philip Martin’s 2010 TV episode (starring David Suchet) we see Poirot struggling with this moral issue in a rather long final scene that is not in the book at all.

At the age of ten, if I had noticed the moral dilemma at all I would have had no doubts in siding with Poirot, but my adult self finds these things less clearcut. As

Professor Anderson says, after attending a philosophy congress in Prague, in Stoppard's TV play, *Professional Foul*:

Ethics is a very complicated business. That's why they have these congresses.

Photos

1. Is this what Poirot saw when he looked out of his compartment on the night of the murder?

<http://blogut.tumblr.com/post/1172979096/scarlet-kimono-ii-by-stephanie-rew>

2. Christie travelled to Istanbul on the Orient Express in 1928. She stayed at the Tokatlian Hotel on the Rue de Pera on that occasion – the hotel where Poirot stays.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokatliyan\\_Hotels](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokatliyan_Hotels)

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