

Murder in Mesopotamia

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but no others]

This is a very unusual Christie as an objective eyewitness to the murder is the first person narrator, rather than someone *helping to solve* the crime. There is no faithful, gullable Captain Hastings accompanying Poirot, or another detective character such as the good doctor in *Roger Ackroyd*, or an impersonal, authorial voice. The story teller is Nurse Amy Leatheran, a 'no nonsense' spinster in her 30s, trained at St Christopher's Hospital, with two years midwifery experience. She had come out to Baghdad with a perfectly well but newly post-natal woman and baby on the ship - those were the days when you could employ a qualified midwife as a nanny!

I thought Amy Leatheran being efficient, shrewd, with glossy brown hair and blue eyes, was bound to fall in love with the amusing Dr Reilly on board ship, and we were in for another exotic thriller/romance exactly like the beginning of *The Man In The Brown Suit*. I was completely wrong. There is very little love in this book: it is a psychological study of jealousy. Christie has a very personal axe to grind. The character of Louise Leidner is very closely based on Katherine, the wife of the famous archaeologist, Leonard Woolley (see Trivia). Christie and Katherine had been friends, until Christie had the effrontery to become engaged to one of Woolley's clique of devoted young male admirers, Max Mallowan. Christie's interest in exploring the strange fascination the real Katherine Woolley exerted over men, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, in the guise of the fictional Louise Leidner, is the focus of this novel, rather than a solution to her murder. Christie exacts an extremely personal, private revenge.

Unlike previous Christie whodunnits there is a very long lead in time until the first murder: Louise Leidner is murdered in Chapter 10. Indeed, impatient readers may have already given up on this book well before, annoyed by the tiresome prattle of Nurse Leatheran. Usually Christie has a dead body by the end of Chapter 1, and the rest of the book is the hunt for the murderer, with more corpses strewn along the way, normally including the person you most suspected. In *Mesopotamia* readers can make up their own minds about just how cruel, egocentric and vain Mrs Leidner was.

Christie takes her time exploring Mrs Woolley's character, in the guise of Louise Leidner. In *Lord Edgware Dies*, for example, the reader is told Lord Edgware was a sadomasochist, but there is no scene showing this. Often Poirot works backwards from a corpse to reconstruct the character of the victim. In many books Poirot reflects on the idea that the dead open their mouths and speak the name of their murderer, if you can gain an understanding of them, psychologically. By piecing together shards of information witnesses reveal, exactly as these archaeologists in *Mesopotamia* recreate a shattered vase, so Poirot habitually solves a case. Dr Leidner says 'You would have been a good archaeologist, M. Poirot. You have the gift of re-creating the past'.

The plot of *Murder in Mesopotamia* is a new variant of the locked room mystery. The expedition house at Tell Yarimjah has all the rooms with doors opening into a single, internal courtyard. There is only one external entrance to the courtyard and the rooms. An Arab boy was washing pots in the courtyard while the murder took place, except possibly when he went out to gossip for 10 minutes. He should have seen the intruder entering through the Archway. No one was seen entering or exiting Louise Leidner's room until her husband discovers the murder at 14.40. How could the murderer have slipped into Louise Leidner's room unseen?

The theme of jealousy is set out right from the start of the book. 'An expedition is probably like our life here in miniature..It has its cliques and rivalries and jealousies.' Louise Leidner is known as 'Lovely Louise' by a young squadron leader. 'Is she very handsome?' asks Nurse Leatheran 'She thinks she is' is the spiteful reply. It turns out this squadron leader was very smitten, and rejected, by Louise, even if she was 'a bit long in the tooth'. She is about 37 yrs old!

Mrs Kelsey says of Louise Leidner 'She causes quarrels..she's bored.....she provides her own drama. She amuses herself by setting other people by the ears.' Major Kelsey observes 'Women are so sweet to each other'. Mrs Kelsey replies 'Cat, cat cat.....but we are usually right about our own sex.' The theme of women as spiteful cats, inflicting pain for their own amusement, not caring about whom they hurt, is carried throughout the book. Cats being cruel, dogs being stupid and soppy but intensely loyal, are constant themes throughout Christie's *oeuvre*.

We next meet Sheila Reilly, a classic Christie heroine: 'good Looking: black hair, blue eyes', but Nurse Leatheran takes a dislike to her off-hand, cool manner, which reminds her of someone 'whose manner always riled' her. Perhaps that is why Christie subconsciously chooses the surname "Reilly". Talking of Louise Leidner, Sheila says 'Of course there is nothing the matter with her. Anything to get attention...making a fuss of her.' Sheila's father summarises his daughter's jealous attitude later in the book 'she hated Mrs Leidner for good old thoroughgoing personal reasons ... it annoyed her when a woman, who in her view is middle-aged and who has already two husbands to her credit, comes along and licks her on her own ground. Mrs Leidner {had} just that sort of calamitous magic that plays the deuce with things - a kind of Belle Dame sans Merci'. It was the triumph of beauty over youth, and Sheila loathed Louise for triumphing over her so openly. The men Louise Leidner casts a spell over, don't interest her at all: they are pawns to cause pain and irritation to other women.

We finally meet Louise Leidner in Chapter 5 after much anticipation, and she *really is* beautiful.

Nurse Leatheran also remarks that there was a ‘cool rudeness ‘ in Mrs Leidner’s tone. Louise was a ‘woman who could easily make enemies’. Nurse Leatheran naively feels Louise is too remote and aloof and ‘didn’t know how stupid and unreasoning and violent jealousy and hate can be.’ The reader feels Mrs Leidner knows *exactly* how to stoke emotions that will boil over into drama. Later Dr Reilly also describes Mrs Leidner as a cat, enjoying playing with people, and seeing their suffering, just as ‘the cat is obeying its blood instinct when it plays with a mouse!’



Left to Right: Max Mallowan, Agatha Christie and Leonard Woolley in Ur in 1931

Miss Johnson, is a 50 year old spinster who has devoted her life to

archaeology and adores Dr Leidner. She is also at the dig. Miss Johnson dislikes Louise ‘if an archaeologist’s wife isn’t really interested, it would be wiser for her not to accompany the expedition. It often leads to friction.’ Rather interestingly, Agatha Christie drops the cat metaphor with Miss Johnson, who is described as ‘rather mannish’ in appearance, and “like a faithful but jealous old dog”. The jealousy is there in all these woman, but Christie reserves dog similes for kind, loyal and true friends.

The next day Mrs Leidner needles David Emmott, and ‘casting a spell’ on Mr Mercado, made Mrs Mercado boil with jealousy. As Nurse Leatheran observes ‘Mercado was a poor fish, and I don’t suppose Mrs Leidner really cared two hoots for his admiration – but his wife cared.’ Poirot says ‘Mrs Leidner was a woman who essentially worshipped herself and who enjoyed more than anything else the sense of power. Wherever she was, she must be the centre of the universe.’

Father Lavigny sums Louise Leidner up as ‘ruthless’. And adds the rather interesting remark ‘You do not know women as I do’. Again the naïve Nurse thinks Father Lavigny must be referring to the confessional: the reader starts to wonder about this odd monk. There are many reasonable clues that Father Lavigny is deeply suspect. He is supposed to be an expert translator of Cuneiform; some of his translations are already ‘surprising’. One would have

thought at a dig the other archaeologists would have realised he was a con man on Day One given the conversation was so completely about archaeology all the time. In *They Came to Baghdad*, an archaeologist knows that a character who pretends to be an archaeologist, is lying *immediately*. Father Lavigny is also in the antika-room at 2am, claiming to have 'heard a noise' although his bedroom is three rooms and a portico away. Finally he is seen talking to the man whom Nurse Leatheran had seen before trying to look into the windows, and gives Poirot a description of this 'stranger' that we know is opposite to the truth. Why would a monk lie about a 'stranger'? It is clear that there is something very fishy about Father Lavigny. He is the red herring in so far as he has nothing to do with the murder, but Christie makes the reader wonder if he could be Frederick Bosner, Louise Leidner's first husband, in disguise.

Agatha Christie and Max Mallowan at Tel-Hallaf



The clues to the real murderer are straightforward. The twist is to realise, as Miss Johnson did, that the murder had to be accomplished from the roof directly *above* Mrs Leidner's room, and that the bars of her window could allow Louise to stick her lovely head out of the room to look upwards. The murderer does not have to get in Louise's bedroom at all. The only person who was on the roof throughout the afternoon, mostly alone, was Dr Leidner. He could lure her to look out of the window, smash her head by dropping a heavy stone, and then re-arrange the body, when he came to her room to talk to her a few hours later. There is also the clue that Dr Leidner enters Louise's room later that afternoon and does not immediately reel out in shock. What was he doing for that minute and a half in her room when he must have discovered the body immediately? The charitable reader would interpret this as the blank numbness of terror. Suspicious readers would know the

conventional detective fiction trope that people always scream *immediately* they find a body. The time was used by Dr Leidner to move Louise's body from the window to the bed. The bloodstain on the carpet by the washstand by the window clinches it.

Christie's skill at being fair but burying the clues so well the reader misses them is exemplified here. The original description of the room mentions bars on the windows. I imagined these were narrow bars, such as you see on Victorian nursery windows or basements in rough areas in towns. Much later Poirot sticks his head out of Mrs Leidner's window, through the bars, but cannot get his shoulders out, so satisfying himself no one could have *got in* that way. So the reader is told that someone could stick his or her head out between the bars, but one is distracted by thinking no one could come in. Similarly, the bloodstain on the carpet by the washstand is noticed, and there is a hypothesis that the killer must have washed stains away, and carelessly dripped on the carpet. In another chapter you find out the washstand is by the window. Again all the information is there, but you have to remember separate items, and piece them together from different bits of the book. Masterful cluing!

Leidner cannot bear the thought of Louise loving his best friend. It is fairly clued: Mrs Leidner's insistence on going on a walk on her own, despite being full of 'nervous terrors', for an afternoon assignation with her new love interest, Mr Carey. Louise returns from 'the walk' looking 'more alive. Her eyes shone'. The 'remarkably handsome' Richard Carey looks at breaking point. The oddest clue of all is Dr Leidner engaging a professional nurse for his wife, when she is perfectly well. Why would he do this? Why does Nurse Leatheran 'settle her on the bed with plenty of pillows and her book', when Louise is perfectly able bodied? Dr Leidner needs a medically qualified person, a truthful English Nurse, to attest to the time of death being much earlier in the afternoon than when Dr Leidner himself discovers her body so giving him the perfect alibi, as everyone at the dig knew Dr Leidner had not left the roof all afternoon.

The denouement of gathered archaeologists and Poirot is also unusual. There are no police, and there is no arrest. Poirot admits prior to the accusation that there is no evidence. Dr Leidner says: 'You knew I would not deny truth. I think really I am rather glad. I'm so tired'. Unlike most Christie murderers, Leidner showed remorse, not for murdering his wife, but for killing his faithful archaeological companion, Anne Johnson. 'I'm sorry about Anne. That was bad – senseless – it wasn't me!' The implication is that Leidner is near death: 'A tired, worn, elderly man', might mean anything. It is odd that in the final chapter Nurse Leatheran fails to mention any outcome for the murderer, when she mentions most of the other characters. Does Leidner commit suicide, or is he going to die of natural causes soon anyway, or be imprisoned? We never know. It does feel unsatisfactory.

The huge weakness of the plot is it is unbelievable that you would not recognise your previous husband from thirteen years ago. Frederick Bosner had married Louise, but she had betrayed him to the authorities as a German spy. Bosner escaped from the authorities

during a train crash, where he is thought to have died. Bosner assumed a new identity, and becomes an archeologist, Dr Leidner. He still adores his wife. Even if he had been physically disfigured by the train accident, his body, his body odour, his laugh, his mannerisms and his voice would still have been instantly recognisable. People's voices do not change until they grow into extreme old age, even if their bodies have been disfigured. Poirot has the grace to admit 'The intimacy of marriage *might* awaken a memory'. In Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, The Count is recognised by his ex-lover, Mercedes, although she was told he had died nine years ago, by the way he twiddles his hair. Poirot recognises 'The Destroyer', an assassin and master of disguises, in *The Big Four*, by his habit of collecting breadcrumbs together, when eating, with a dab of bread. The other huge clue is that although Frederick Bosner has frightened off *all* other men from marrying Louise, by threatening letters over the years, Dr Leidner was allowed to marry Louise. Why could Dr Leidner marry a woman no one else was allowed to marry? The threats only return when Louise starts falling for Richard Carey. It was Dr Leidner's bad luck that Poirot just happened to be passing through Hassanieh after disentangling some military scandal in Syria.

The true moral of this tale is beware of offending writers, from Chaucer to Christie: their revenge is extraordinarily effective. This book was Christie's catharsis for previous, deep felt ill usage of Max Mallowan and herself.

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Hunting Scene found at Tell Halaf