

## The ABC Murders

1936

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

This is one of Christie's most ambitious and most brilliant plots, and with its humour and pace, altogether a great read. "Alas, I grow old and suspicious like the blind watch-dog who growls when there is nothing there" complains Poirot when the murder he expected seems not to have occurred. His suspicions, of course, turn out to have been correct.

In her first published novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie models Poirot on Sherlock Holmes. Poirot, like Holmes, is active in finding physical clues. Cigarette ash and bicycle tyre marks are the stuff of detection. Seventeen books on, her detectives, Poirot in particular, are more concerned with psychology than with cycles. Poirot teases Hastings for expecting Holmesian deductions. As the two of them are seated in a first-class railway carriage (a very Holmsian setting) Hastings is eager to learn what Poirot has deduced from their visit to the scene of the first murder. "The crime," said Poirot, "was committed by a man of medium height with red hair and a cast in the left eye. He limps slightly on the right foot and has a mole just below the shoulder-blade." Hastings is, for a moment, taken in. Once Hastings realises he is being teased Poirot goes on: "You ... demand of me a pronouncement à la Sherlock Holmes! Now for the truth – *I do not know what the murderer looks like, nor where he lives, nor how to set hands upon him.*" But Christie, whilst teasing Conan Doyle just as Poirot teases Hastings, also pays tribute to her great predecessor.



**A is for Andover**

[<http://www.100thbirthday.co.uk/images/StoreGallery/pages/0405Andover-1930s.htm>]

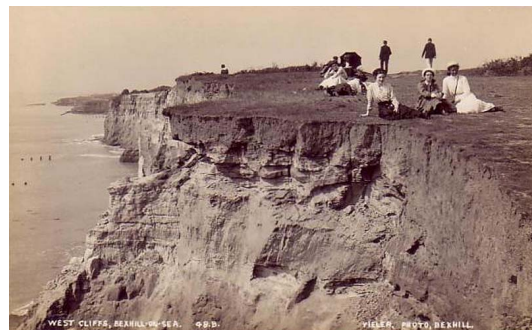
"Do you think he left it by mistake then?" Hastings asks Poirot, referring to the *ABC Railway Guide* that was found at the scene of the murder. Poirot replies: "Of course not. He left it on purpose. The fingerprints tell us that." Hastings says: "But there weren't any on it". "That is what I mean" responds Poirot, echoing the famous clue in Conan Doyle's story *Silver Blade* of the dog that didn't bark in the night. Fingerprints, or the lack of them, play a significant part in the evidence against the murderer when Poirot lies about finding them on the all important typewriter, just

as in *Death in the Clouds* Poirot lies about finding fingerprints on the murder weapon in order to trap the murderer into a confession.

At this stage in her writing career Christie is clearly exploring and extending the whodunnit genre and its possibilities. Well before the discussion of Sherlock Holmes Poirot and Hastings had discussed crime and detective stories. Hastings wants the stories to have physical excitement and adventure. Poirot muses about the type of crime he would 'order' if one could order crimes like ordering dinner in a restaurant. In effect this is Christie musing about possible whodunnit novels. Poirot would like: "A very simple crime. A crime with no complications. A crime of quiet domestic life ... very unimpassioned – very *intime*." He goes on to consider a static crime where the only adventure is in the solving of the intellectual puzzle. He outlines the plot of Christie's next but one novel, *Cards on the Table*.

*The ABC Murders* is also to some extent foreshadowed in the novel published two novels earlier: *Three Act Tragedy*. In that novel, Christie starts to explore what one might call the motiveless motive. In *The ABC Murders* she runs with that idea for all that it is worth.

The question Christie sets herself is whether it is possible to write a whodunnit in which most of the murders are random in the sense that the victim could have been someone quite different. The unwritten rules of engagement for Christie are that the plot and solution are utterly rational. She would not be content with the solution being that the murders are without motive because the murderer is 'mad'. In *Three Act Tragedy* she explores one motive for a random murder. In *The ABC Murders* she explores another, more interesting, motive. One murder is the principal murder – the one for which there is a perfectly standard motive: inheriting a large sum of money. The would-be murderer faces a major problem: his motive and opportunity are so clear that he would immediately be a prime suspect for the murder. It so happens that the person he wants to murder has the initials C.C. and lives in a village that begins with C. So he hits on the idea of 'hiding' the principal murder amongst other murders. The first murder is of someone with the initials A.A. living in a town beginning with A; the second of B.B. in a town beginning with B. He announces, in letters to Poirot, that he is going to do this, and emphasises the pattern by leaving the *ABC Railway Guide* at each murder location. As Poirot says during the denouement: "When do you notice a pin least? When it is in a pin-cushion. When do you notice an individual murder least? When it is one of a series of related murders."



**B is for Bexhill-on-Sea**

[<http://www.oldukphotos.com/graphics/England%20Photos/Sussex,%20Bexhill%20on%20Sea,%20West%20Cliff.jpg>]

Although the plot sounds simple it is no simple matter to pull it off. One problem that Christie faced was how to keep the people who might be relevant for each murder as characters throughout the story given that each murder is unrelated to the others. She solves this problem by creating a group of people, a kind of posse, made up of key suspects from the first three murders who set themselves the task, under the directorship of Poirot, of finding the 'mad' murderer.

A second problem that Christie faced was much more difficult. How to mask the true solution whilst being fair to the reader – fair to her own high standards? To hide the murderer, the motive must seem to be the crazy obsession with the alphabet. If the reader is not to tumble to the correct solution then this crazy solution must seem possible, and indeed likely. The genre generally demands that the murderer should be a significant character in the book. It would not be good enough for the murderer to be a crazy person who has not appeared in the book at all except as a door-to-door salesman of silk stockings mentioned by some of the witnesses. So Christie does something pretty innovative. She creates a character, with the extraordinary name, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, and devotes eight (out of the total of 35) chapters to him, chapters that are quite separate from Hastings' narrative. In the reader's mind Cust is readily identified with the 'mad' murderer, and the posse of people, which includes the real murderer, become assistant detectives to Poirot. Christie has already often used this narrative method for misdirecting the reader: that the murderer plays the role of Poirot's little helper.

Christie is, however, rightly unhappy with the creation of Cust if he remains unconnected to the murderer's plot. It would then be too much of a coincidence that he was near the scene of each of the crimes. So the final piece in Christie's solution to her authorial puzzle is to have Cust set up by the murderer to be the fall guy – to be close to the murder on each occasion. She does this by the murderer paying Cust to be the door-to-door salesman and sending him to the houses of the people who will become the victims.



**C is for Churston**

[<http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/c/churston/index.shtml>]

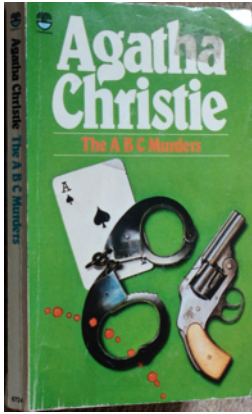
Christie has had to develop these innovative story-telling techniques in order to tell a story with such a novel solution and within the rules of engagement of the classic whodunnit. How might the reader solve the puzzle? The most likely way is to realise the real motive behind the apparently random murders. The reader is likely to think about what could the motive be. One technique of misdirection that Christie uses is to discuss a question that the reader is likely to be pondering – a question crucial to the solution – and providing answers that will lead the reader away from the true

answer. She does this in chapter 13 when there is a detailed discussion of the possible motive for the alphabetic crimes.

Poirot, as so often, uses an analogy. 'If a fly settles on your forehead again and again, maddening you by its tickling – what do you do? You endeavour to kill that fly. .... But consider now this case – if the victims are alphabetically selected, then they are not being removed because they are a source of annoyance to the murderer personally.' The question of motive is taken up by Dr Thompson, who is described as an alienist and must be an early literary example of the expert in criminal profiling now so popular in many TV crime series. Dr Thompson says: 'But as M. Poirot says, there isn't such a thing as a murderer who commits crimes at random. Either he removes people who stand (however insignificantly) in his path, or else he kills by conviction. He removes clergymen, or policemen, or prostitutes because he firmly believes that they should be removed.' The discussion goes on for another page and a half. Poirot suggests that the motive might be direct personal hatred of him perhaps because Poirot vanquished him in the course of his career, or perhaps simply because Poirot is a foreigner. His final remarks provide the reader with both a clue and a misdirection. 'If we knew the exact reason – fantastic, perhaps, to us – but logical to him – of why our madman commits these crimes, we should know, perhaps, who the next victim is likely to be.' This is misdirection, as has been the whole discussion, because it is giving a line of thinking about motive that will take the reader away from the true motive, but it is a clue in that the solution does lie in discovering the reason for the alphabetic pattern in the crimes.

With all this misdirection and the unusual construction to the novel designed to prevent the reader from solving the puzzle, is Christie fair in her clueing? There are only two real clues. The first is the fact that the letter to Poirot announcing the third murder is delayed because it is misaddressed so that Poirot sees it only after the murder. The delay has the consequence that the murder has occurred before any attempt to prevent it can be made; and it is curious because the perpetrator did not misaddress the first two letters. The second is the fact that Franklin Clarke stands to inherit a large fortune on his brother's death (a clue that Christie slips past us with great deftness). Two clues only may sound meagre but it is sufficient because this novel, par excellence, meets the 'cryptic crossword clue' criterion. Although there are few specific clues, if you, the reader, hit upon the correct solution and think it through then you will know almost certainly that it is correct. Once you think of the pin in a pin cushion idea, everything fits into place: the difference in the wealth and social standing of the third victim compared with the others; the clear motive; the reason for the ABC motif; the reason for the letters to Poirot; and the personality and behaviour of the murderer.

The reader might remain puzzled about Cust. The way in which Cust has been set up by the murderer to be the fall guy is clever, although perhaps relying too much on his highly suggestible personality. Cust is almost convicted of the four murders. Poirot sees Cust as the fox and the murderer as the English hunt. 'A strange sport .. hounds are on his trail, and at last they catch him and he dies – quickly and horribly' as Poirot describes it. He then castigates Hastings, the conventional Englishman, for



being about to suggest that the fox enjoys the chase. But even worse for the fox than death, Poirot suggests, is to be 'put in a box and never let him go'. The death penalty, Poirot (and perhaps Christie) is suggesting, is preferable to life imprisonment.

[TH]