

Murder is Easy 1939

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

I thought that I had read all the Agatha Christie novels before starting this project of analysing their plots, clues and solutions. I was wrong. I had never previously read *Murder is Easy*. This gave me the opportunity to try and guess the solution knowing that I could not be making use of memory, however vague.



In 1979 *Masquerade* was published as a children's illustrated book. It was a sophisticated treasure hunt. Its author, Kit Williams, also designed a beautiful jewelled golden hare. He buried the hare somewhere in Britain and published the book which, through its intricate and rather lovely illustrations, provided the arcane clues to the whereabouts of the hare. The hare's location was discovered in 1982 almost simultaneously by two different methods. The first method was the one intended: two physics teachers, working together, had made sense of the clues hidden in Kit Williams' illustrations, and found the position of the hare. They started digging and unearthed the treasure but had not

recognised it as such in its clay box. The second method made no use of the book but instead used information about Kit Williams' life and a knowledge of the places he knew well.

Agatha Christie novels might, similarly, be solved by two quite different methods. They might be solved using the clues that are available both to the reader and to a detective who is within the fictional world of the novel. These are the 'proper' clues, the objective clues – the equivalent of Kit Williams' illustrations – and are crucial to the quality of a *whodunnit*. The other method for solving a *whodunnit* is based on knowledge of the author's methods of misdirecting the reader, her general approach to plots and character, and even the relationships to her other books. These 'clues' are not available to the fictional detective but only to the reader. In most of the reviews posted on this website we focus on the extent to which the solution can be discovered using objective clues. In solving *Murder is Easy*, however, it was clues based on a knowledge of Christie's novels that were more helpful to me. Whilst reading I made notes on what I was thinking as the tale unfolded.



It was in chapter 11, a little before half way through the book, that I was first aware of what felt like an important objective clue. Mrs Horton had died of acute gastritis a year or so before the novel begins. She was in fact the first murder victim. Although her death had been put down to natural causes the reader knows better. Poison seemed the most likely mechanism. Who could have poisoned her? She was being looked after by two nurses and she herself thought that they were poisoning her. Her husband, Major Horton, lived with her. When asked whether she had many friends in the village, he replied: 'People were very kind. Whitfield sent down grapes and peaches from his hot-house. And the old tabbies used to come and sit with her. Honoria Waynflete and Lavinia Pinkerton.' And then a couple of paragraphs later we learn that she took 'some patent quack nostrum' from the local antiques dealer, Mr Ellsworthy, who had already been portrayed as rather odd and suspicious. What struck me was the grapes and peaches. Lord Whitfield is the local squire, born poor, but having made his fortune as a newspaper baron he had bought the Manor House. This sounded like a good proper Christie clue. Could the poison have been administered in the fruit, I wondered? If that were the mechanism then the murderer was either Lord Whitfield himself, or his secretary and fiancée, Bridget Conway.

My suspicions were strengthened by what I thought I knew of Christie's style. In chapter 13 we learn about various employments of one of the victims, Amy Gibbs. She worked as a maid first at the Hortons, then with Lord Whitfield, then with Miss Waynflete. In the following discussion, when Luke Fitzwilliam (the central character who plays a role as detective) is speculating that Amy Gibbs may have been murdered because she knew something compromising about someone, it is notable that Luke never mentions Lord Whitfield as the possible 'someone'.

Later in that same chapter there is a clue which led me to believe that I could identify the murderer. This clue depends on remembering the brilliant opening chapter. In that opening chapter we meet Luke Fitzwilliam, having just returned to Britain from the East, on the train from the South Coast to London. He gets talking to an elderly lady, Miss Pinkerton, who tells him that she believes that several people have been murdered in the village where she lives. She is on her way to tell Scotland Yard of her suspicions. She is particularly worried because she believes that the village doctor will be the next victim. She bases this prediction on having seen a certain look in the eyes of the person she believes to be the murderer. She says to Luke that she saw the 'look on a person's face'.

When Luke later learns that Miss Pinkerton was knocked down and killed by a car before she got to Scotland Yard, and that the village doctor has died, his adventures begin. The significant clue is that in chapter 13 when Miss Waynflete asks Luke whether Miss Pinkerton told him who was carrying out the killings, Luke replies: 'A man with a certain look in his eyes. A look you couldn't mistake, according to her.' From then on Luke refers to the murderer as a *man*, and yet Miss Pinkerton had said a *person*. I knew that there would be a reason why Luke had misremembered this detail in what Miss Pinkerton had said – Christie usually has a reason for every detail. That reason, I was pretty sure, was that the murderer was a *woman*.

At this stage I felt fairly sure that the murderer was Bridget Conway. She lived with Lord Whitfield at the Manor and so could have tampered with the fruit sent to Mrs Horton. There was another reason why I thought this a likely solution. Christie liked to experiment with plots and solutions, ringing the changes on various themes. This novel was in the *genre* of her Tommy and Tuppence novels and their like: Luke was playing the role of the detective and he had teamed up with the beautiful young Bridget Conway. In most of Christie's novels in this *genre* the young couple are the detectives. But in one such novel the *man* turns out to be the murderer. In none of these previous novels, however, is the *woman* the murderer. By making Bridget the murderer Christie would be trying out another variation on a theme. My belief that Bridget Conway was the murderer was strengthened further when, in chapter 14, Luke is meditating on the possible suspects. This is an example of a classic Christie misdirection chapter in which suspects are listed and discussed, but the real murderer is not considered. Luke does not even consider those living at the Manor.

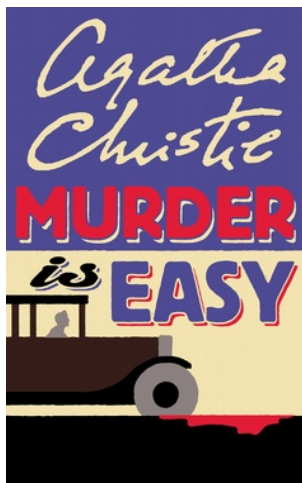


The main problem with this solution was motive. Why would Bridget kill all those people? Indeed why would anyone? It must be that there is a secret – a secret about Bridget, or, more likely, about Lord Whitworth that Bridget, as his fiancée, was keen to keep hidden. This secret could have passed down the line of murder victims. Mrs Horton learned it. Amy Gibbs was her maid and learned it. She passed it on to Carter who spoke of it to his doctor, Dr Humbleby. I wasn't sure how Tommy Pierce learned it, but he was notorious for poking his nose into other people's affairs.

It is always easier to find evidence to support one's hypothesis than to notice evidence supporting other theories. In chapter 16 Christie seemed keen to portray Bridget as a venal and rather cunning person who was not at all suitable to be the object of Luke's love. I thought that Christie was paving the way for the denouement that would reveal her as murderer. Later in that chapter Bridget quite suddenly tells Luke that she has decided to break her engagement with Lord Whitworth and to accept Luke's declarations of love. This seemed too

sudden and out of character. What could be her motive? I thought that she was lying to Luke in order to ensure that she could keep close to him and be his confidante.

It was not until chapter 17 and over three-quarters of the way through the novel that a possible motive for the series of murders emerges. All the victims had crossed swords with Lord Whitfield at some point. This is revealed to the reader to make it seem that Whitfield himself must be the murderer, but we are still too far from the end of the book for that to be the final solution. So I could still hold on to the idea of Bridget as murderer, taking vengeance on behalf of her future husband. But I was slightly uneasy because in building up the case against Lord Whitfield the clue about the fruit sent to Mrs Horton is highlighted, and I had thought that this was to be an arcane clue to the correct solution. And then I realised that Christie had a reason to lead the reader away from considering that anyone living at the Manor was the murderer. She wanted to spring Lord Whitfield on the reader as the probable murderer at this point in the novel. The final twist could be that Bridget and not Lord Whitfield is the murderer but I was beginning to doubt my solution.



By the end of chapter 18, Miss Waynflete was starting to assume too large a role in the drama to be simply the bystander that she had seemed to be. Then in chapter 19 when Lord Whitfield says to Luke that Honoria Waynflete will understand that evil doesn't go unpunished I noted in the margin of my copy that perhaps it is Miss Waynflete who is taking revenge on behalf of Lord Whitfield: we know that the two of them were, many years ago, engaged to be married. At the end of the chapter it is arranged that Luke and Bridget will be going to Miss Waynflete's house in about an hour. This was starting to look like one of Christie's thriller endings in which the murderer almost gets away with her final killing. Was Bridget going to be killed by Miss Waynflete? I wrote in the margin at the end of the chapter: "It is beginning to look like Miss Waynflete". Two pages later I wrote: "It must be Miss Waynflete because she has become too major a character otherwise. Bridget still suspect, though - but what is her motive?" Another two pages later the real motive struck me and I wrote: "Was the motive to get Lord Whitfield hanged. But why so many murders?" By the end of chapter 20, I had to commit myself - the denouement would be upon me. I wrote a shortlist of two: Miss Waynflete with motive to frame Lord Whitfield for murder as revenge for his not marrying her; and Bridget, but the motive unclear. I even gave a percentage to my guesses: 70% chance that Miss Waynflete is the murderer and 30% chance for Bridget.

I hit on the correct solution though I did not have the certainty that accompanies solving the best Christie *whodunnits*. More importantly my reasoning was based mainly on two *clues* based on a knowledge of Christie's writings and not on *objective clues*. First I was almost certain that the murderer was a woman for the

reason given above. Second, Miss Waynflete was becoming a more and more significant character – indeed the other characters except Luke, Bridget and Lord Whitfield had all but vanished from the novel.

The objective clues, on the other hand, were far less helpful. I missed one: that the police had learned the number plate of the car that had killed Miss Pinkerton from a woman who mentioned it to another woman. The number plate in question was that of Lord Whitfield's car. This turns out to be a fair, though rather hidden, clue that a woman was trying to implicate Lord Whitfield as the killer. Other than that, the only pointer to Miss Waynflete was motive. Miss Waynflete had told Luke that she had ended her relationship after Lord Whitfield (or plain Gordon Ragg as he was then – the boot-shop keeper's son) had wrung the neck of her pet canary. Luke subsequently told Bridget this story. Bridget, the first person to realise who the murderer is, uses knowledge we don't have, namely a certainty that Lord Whitfield would never have killed a canary. She therefore felt certain that Miss Waynflete's story was a lie and that Miss Waynflete was not therefore quite who she seemed to be.



So, who is the detective in *Murder is Easy*? Christie wrote this novel, shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, in Syria where her husband was leading an archaeological dig. She wrote of an English village, Wychwood-under-Ashe, the name perhaps from Ascott-under-Wychwood on the edge of the Cotswolds. One might think that the setting was ideal for a Miss Marple

novel and, indeed, it was re-written as such for the TV Marple series starring Julia McKenzie. Two of the characters have many similarities to Miss Marple: elderly spinsters, apparently rather vague and rambling but actually as sharp as mustard. But then one of these characters is murdered and the other is the murderer, as though Christie had been playing with the idea of making Miss Marple a murderer, and at the same time with wanting to kill her off.

Superintendent Battle, whom we have met in several previous Christie adventure/thriller novels, appears, but only at the end and he plays no role in solving the crimes. Through most of the novel Luke appears to be the detective, and he is a retired policeman, but he completely fails to find the solution until he is practically told who the murderer is. Just as Tuppence is brighter than Tommy, so, one feels, Bridget is brighter than Luke. Christie must have felt, correctly I imagine, that she herself was brighter than most of the university professors, and the other men with whom she socialised. Only Bridget sees the truth before being told, though not until the last moment. One clue that Bridget uses is the clue I used: that Miss Pinkerton had not referred to the murderer as a *man* (as Luke kept doing) but as a *person*. But how did Bridget know this? In chapter 20 she asks Luke to repeat what Miss Pinkerton had said to him in the train many

days before. Luke must have a most extraordinary ability of recall: he repeats Miss Pinkerton's words – all 120 of them – absolutely word perfect.

Murder is Easy lacks good objective clues. It is an enjoyable read but a long way from Christie at her best. In chapter 2 Luke Fitzwilliam remembers the name of the village doctor, Dr Humbleby, because it reminds him of a nursery rhyme: *Fiddle de dee, fiddle de dee, the fly has married the bumble bee*. The nursery rhyme plays no further part in the novel but perhaps it stayed in Christie's mind. In her next novel – her most ambitious, and one of the greatest of them all - she uses a nursery rhyme to provide the structure to the story. It also provides the title to the book. That novel is: *And then there were none*.

Photos

Masquerade book cover: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masquerade_\(book\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masquerade_(book))

Hare: <http://catillest.com/va-british-design-1948-2012-part-1/>

The church of Holy Trinity, Ascott-under-Wychwood:
http://odg.org.uk/history/chippingnorton/ascott_under_wychwood.html

Julia McKenzie as Miss Marple (not in the novel) and Benedict Cumberbatch as Luke in the TV episode of *Murder is Easy*.

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