

## Towards Zero written 1941 published 1944

[This review contains plot spoilers for this but for no other book]

Agatha Christie tries a completely new angle on the revenge motif. The murderer's aim is to frame an innocent person for murder in order to punish and humiliate them. The murderer is perfectly unperturbed by killing an innocent old lady, purely to wreak revenge on someone who has offended the murderer, in order to 'see them hang'.

Previous Christie plots involve innocent people found guilty of murder, with the guilty parties happy to watch someone else be sentenced to death. In other books, she sets up 'red herrings' where suspicion is thrown on an innocent party, for example by a corpse being moved. *Towards Zero* is the first book where the murderer frames a specific person, for revenge. The murderer had to kill someone known to them both, in order to set up all the false clues for the police. Superintendent Battle and his nephew, Inspector James Leach, completely fail to solve the crime.

The murderer requires a very long lead-in time with a meticulous plan. It is not a coincidence the murderer started the plans on St. Valentine's day, since the revenge motif is having been abandoned in favour of another lover.

One can see *Towards Zero* as a progression from *Five Little Pigs* also written in 1941. Both feature an innocent woman being accused of murder. Both have the matrix of childhood friendships with one girl being beloved by a trio of boys: two brothers and another male friend that she married. In *Five Little Pigs* it is Caroline who marries the artist, Amyas, and the Blake brothers love her too. Sixteen years later, unmarried Meredith Blake is described as Caroline's faithful 'Old Dobbin'. In *Towards Zero*, Audrey marries Neville Strange, the great tennis player, but the Royde brothers were also in love with her. Years later, the unmarried Thomas Royde is described as 'Old Dobbin' [see *Trivia*]. Here the similarities of plot between the two books diverge. Another click of the kaleidoscope of Agatha Christie's logical mind.

As a neat echo of the murderer's long lead-in time and meticulous planning, *Towards Zero* has a bewildering number of seemingly unconnected storylines, and *no bodies*, for the first half of the book. Normally in a Christie, one expects a murder almost immediately, and the rest of the book is working out 'whodunnit'. But the first half of this novel seems to be filled with irrelevant anecdotes. What on earth can be the relevance of Superintendent Battle's daughter confessing to petty pilfering at her school? Why should this old lawyer, Treves, be wittering on about people from previous murder cases decades ago? What has an honest, despairing Scotsman, throwing himself off a cliff and failing to kill himself, to do with anyone? Why does a monosyllabic Malayan rubber plantation owner decide to visit England after a gap of 7 years? The most successful, calm, rich and glamorous English tennis player, Neville Strange, asks his ex-wife and his current wife to stay at his beloved guardian's Country House at the same time, in a spirit of reconciliation: is this really a good idea? As always in a Christie novel there is a reason for all this 'witter': misdirection. In this novel the reader has to glean the wheat from the chaff in each sentence.

Without the rather arbitrary *deus ex-machina* intervention of *Truth*, embodied in the archetypal Scotsman, Angus MacWhirter, the murderer's revenge would have succeeded. Audrey Strange would have been hanged for Lady Tressilian's murder. MacWhirter, the ultimate honest man, cannot tell a lie despite the consequences of losing his job, his wife, his health, and almost his life. It is a rather ironic moral twist that MacWhirter *does*, in the end, lie to save the life of the woman he has fallen in love with, but only because he has worked out the correct solution, and *knows it to be true*. MacWhirter, by using his wee grey cells, proves to himself and Battle, what happened by finding the wet rope coiled up in the box room. A vital clue the inept police have already missed:

'I haven't looked through this, sir' said {PC} Jones... Superintendent Battle replies 'Only a waste of time. From the dust on the floor nobody has been here for at least six months.'

Ah, the plodding policeman without Poirot's analytical mind, and clearly with resource allocation issues even in 1941. Indeed Poirot haunts this book, but never appears.

Battle frowned: 'I wish I knew what kept putting Hercule Poirot into my head'. Battle goes on to describe him 'as dangerous as a black mamba and a she-leopard'. Battle explains this murder is 'right up his street...Real psychology – not the half-baked stuff people hand out who know nothing about it'. It is interesting that for the TV adaptation they put in Jane Marple rather than Poirot [*see Trivia*].

The second half of the book, rather like the second half of a Shakespeare comedy, weaves all the different characters, plots and information into a coherent, satisfying whole. The clue, in fact, is in the aptly titled 'prologue', right at the start, eloquently put by the elderly, shrewd lawyer, Treves. 'I like a good detective story..but they begin in the wrong place! They begin with the murder. But the murder is the end. The story begins long before that - years before sometimes – with all the causes and events that bring certain people to a certain place at a certain time on a certain day....All converging towards a given spot...Zero Hour.'

The view across the Dart towards Dittisham

[Nevile swims across to the other side to perform the murder, and back again]



The clinching clue that Neville Strange must have killed Lady Tressilian's is that he inexplicably goes out alone after 10 pm, in the rain, to seek the company of a man he loathes, Ted Latimer, at the hotel on the other side of the creek. Ted kindly drives him back to the house, 16 miles by road, as Strange missed the last ferry back. Lots of witnesses at the hotel saw Neville, who is not only a nationally famous top tennis player but the local well loved lad, playing billiards with Latimer at *exactly* the time Lady Tressilian was murdered. Latimer said he dropped Strange back at the house at 02.30 hours. Neville Strange's only reason to go out on this night must have been to give himself a cast-iron alibi: always deeply suspicious. Innocent people don't require alibis.



Mr Strange has never sought Latimer's company before, and disliked him, since Latimer was in love with Strange's current wife, and was always following her. Strange carefully rings Lady Tressilian's internal bedroom bell, so the sleepy, already drugged, maid has to get out of bed to answer it, so putting the exact time Strange leaves the house to go out, by slamming the front door. Barrett can swear to attending Lady Tressilian when Mr Strange had left the house that night with the melodramatic front door slam, so unlike his usual calm, suave, thoughtful self. The clue was there: a long pole to pull the wire in the hall that rang the maid's bell in her bedroom. Strange, having grown up there will *know* the ferry timetable. He cannot have missed the last ferry back, except on purpose. He also knew that the engine roar of Latimer's car returning him to the house at 2.30 am will tear through the silent night, so be heard by the old but ever vigilant, butler, Hurstall. Thus his alibi was established for when he leaves Gull Point at 10.20 pm, crossed the creek by ferry at 10.30pm (the ferryman knows him well), and arrived back after the murder has been committed at 02.30 am, by the Hotel staff, the ferryman, Latimer and the servants at Gull Point. The perfect alibi: far *too* perfect.

No one saw him quickly swim back across the creek, climb the rope into his own bedroom, tiptoe across to kill Lady Tressilian, set up the misleading clues to be found by the police, and then shin down the rope again, re-swim the creek, dress in his

pinstriped suit, and find Latimer at 11.15 pm for that game of billiards. There are about 45 minutes from 10.30 to 11.15pm when Nevile said he could not find Ted Latimer at the Hotel. This is the time he had to do the murder, with some very fast swimming and rope climbing thrown in. He must have been soaking wet, arriving at the Hotel, but fortunately, it was raining heavily. Presumably Nevile stowed the soaking wet rope in the box room when he returned to the house at 2.30 am.

Nevile took his pinstripe suit to the cleaners at Saltington. Even a very gormless dry cleaning assistant would have recognised such a famous tennis star and wonder why he gave his name as 'MacWhirter'. This error, when the true Scottish MacWhirter gets the 'wrong suit', is the chink that opens up the ray of truth. This odd mistake is never fully explained, nor the issues surrounding the suit cleaning, which is a minor weakness of the plot.

The elaborate double-bluff of 'framing himself' by smearing his own golf club with Lady Tressilian's hair and blood, cleaning and replacing the real murder weapon of a steel ball from the fender screwed onto a racket handle [no idea why he did not throw this altered racket away, as it can only point to him as the brilliant tennis player with a 'killer' backhand stroke]. The blood stained yellow gloves tucked into the ivy outside Lady Tressilian's window are obviously a 'plant': a real killer would have disposed of them across the bay.

The murder had to be 'an inside job', one of the houseguests or member of the house, because of the detailed knowledge about Lady Tressilian's faithful old maid, Barrett, drinking the fluid from soaked senna pods each night, to which the killer adds a sleeping pill.

Only Nevile is athletic enough to climb a rope: Thomas Royde has a crippled arm. Ted Latimer cannot swim, as Battle rather brutally finds out when he throws Latimer into the sea from a boat: 'there's only one way to make sure that a person can't swim and that's to throw them in and watch'. You get the feeling Battle rather enjoyed nearly drowning Mr. Latimer. One wonders if this is an example of police racial prejudice, since Latimer had previously been described as a 'Dago'.

It had to be Nevile Strange but the real puzzle is *why*? He had no motive to kill his adored guardian, who brought him up, after his own parents' untimely deaths. He has no need of her money, left to him in her will: he was a rich man already. Christie is not so fair with clues for the reader. It is only 33 pages from the end we discover that Audrey left Nevile, not the other way round. Nevile was 'chivalrous' and arranged that he would take the blame: the world saw his beautiful, new, 21 year old second wife, and thought it understood. But Audrey had run away with Adrian Royde, fleeing her terrifying psychopath of a husband. Adrian had been killed in a car crash soon after, and Audrey had had a nervous breakdown. Their friends explained Audrey's nervous collapse because of Nevile divorcing her to marry Kay, not the true reason of Adrian Royde's death.

Nevile did not realise that Thomas Royde knew from his brother, Adrian, that it was Audrey who left Nevile. Adrian had written a letter to Thomas in Malaya, just before he died.

Battle and Audrey speculate on whether Adrian's death in a car crash was an accident 'he was killed..I felt as though Neville had managed it somehow'. 'Perhaps he did' said Battle...'Motor accidents can be arranged'.

We discover Neville murdered his own brother when they were boys, although we don't have the background motive. We know from the description Treves gives that this child, who plans and practices shooting arrows before the murder of his brother. Treves talks about this at dinner, and is dead the next morning. There is a clue at this point in the book, but it is so subtle, I missed it. After Treves's warning at dinner, Neville nips out, and re-enters later via the French Windows 'his face looked excited and unhappy and he was breathing deeply'. Why was he breathless, when he's just been standing outside watching the moonlight on the sea, given he was an athlete? Answer: he's just sprinted 100 yards down the road to Mr Treves's hotel to put the 'Out of Order' sign on the lift, and sprinted back again. Again another clue it had to be Neville, as only a 'local' would know the out of order sign was kept behind the desk. Presumably Neville nipped back again early the next morning, or even later that night, to put the sign back behind the desk, as neither the hotel proprietress, nor the Porter were aware that the sign had been on the lift. So Mr Treves, an old man of nearly 80, with known heart disease, died before the real plot action begins, because he gave the murderer a warning. The 'busy cheerful doctor' Lazenby signs the death certificate without a second thought: an expected death 'that's the worst of these heart cases. The end is nearly always sudden.'

We know both Neville's parents died when he was young. Could he have murdered them too, if they suspected the truth about their son? There is no speculation in the book about this. However, we know Neville has no qualms about murdering Camilla Tressilian, who has been a kind mother to him since the death of his own parents. There is a final clue. When they are all on the beach together Audrey says to Neville: 'Your wife wants you. She's waving to you.' Neville replies in a very low voice 'You're my wife, Audrey...' It is clear that Neville will never allow their marriage to be over, even though *he* has re-married.

There are a few loose ends of plot that are never tied up. Battle and Audrey Strange both believe Neville killed Adrian Royde, his close childhood friend, from jealousy. This is left as speculation: unlike other Christie novels where the murderer often confesses, Neville's confessions of this or Treves's death, or about his own brother or parents are never mentioned.

Tracing the mathematical precision of Agatha Christie's plotting, to serve up a novel murder mystery from the base line, is always interesting. Christie enjoyed word play: early on you are told that Neville Strange has a 'killer back hand'. In previous books the murderer alters the timing of a murder to give him or herself an alibi. In other books an innocent person has suspicion thrown onto them, either unintentionally or intentionally, the murderer being content to lie low and let others take the blame. There are several in this series with the innocent person's predicament becoming more and more extreme, which ends with the daughter of Caroline Crale in *Five Little Pigs*, asking Monsieur Poirot to obtain a pardon for her dead mother 16 yrs after she was convicted of murder. In all these books the murderer wants to kill the

murder victim and has motive to do so {money or jealousy}. In *Towards Zero*, there is yet another variation of the puzzle; the initial victim is not the target; the murderer is purely framing his innocent victim for that murder, for revenge.