

Crooked House 1949

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

This highly original whodunnit is wrapped inside a romantic cover. Our narrator and hero, Charles Hayward, is in love with Sophia Leonides. But Sophia's grandfather, Aristide Leonides, has been murdered. Sophia, along with all of the family who have been living together in the 'Crooked House' are suspects. Until the murderer is found, Sophia will not marry Charles. So Charles sets out, working closely with the police, to discover who killed Aristide Leonides.

"Five books are work to one that is real pleasure". That is Christie's assessment of her own experience. *Crooked House*, Christie tells us in her author's foreword, is one of those few novels that she found a pleasure to write. Peter Schaeffer, in his play *Amadeus*, explores the idea that Mozart was simply a conduit for the copying down of Divine music. Christie writes: "I don't know what put the Leonides family into my head – they just came. Then, like Topsy, 'they grewed'. I feel that I myself was only their scribe".

In her foreword Christie says that she had saved this book up for years, "thinking about it, working it out". Christie's notebooks show that she had thought about the book's characters before she had definitely decided on the identity of the murderer. But it is in the identity of the murderer that the originality of the novel lies and the solution breaks what was at the time an unwritten rule of the whodunnit genre. As always, developing and extending a genre poses, for the author, a difficult narrative problem. If the actual writing of the book came as fluently as Christie claims she must have done a great deal of the thinking beyond what is apparent from the notebooks. Perhaps she had been thinking for years about writing a book in which a child is the murderer but that she was not sure, until shortly before starting to write *Crooked House*, that this was the novel in which to develop that idea. Whatever the incubation, the result is a novel that is doubly interesting. First because of the solution. Second because, as a by-product of her successfully solving the narrative problems posed by the solution, Christie also writes, for the first time, a well-clued *whodunnit* in which the clues are predominantly truly psychological.

Right from the early Poirot novels Christie has been trying to distance herself from what might be called the *Sherlock Holmes approach*. In *Murder on the Links* in particular Poirot relentlessly lampoons Inspector Giraud from the French Sûreté for being a 'human foxhound'. Poirot is dismissive of those small physical clues so beloved by Giraud and the Victorian detective. Poirot's rhetoric is about the value of psychology. In practice, however, it is

the physical clues that continue to be important in Christie's novels. In addition she makes excellent use of clues relating to how people behave or what they say. But, on the whole, these are clues because they provide objective evidence – a person shows, for example, that he knows something that he shouldn't have known or uses clothing to conceal a person's identity, or behaves in an uncharacteristic manner for a specific reason. It is not until *Cards on the Table* that Christie attempts to write a *whodunnit* in which the clues involve understanding the mind of the murderer. That novel is innovative in Christie's work in exploring the idea of solving a crime through matching an understanding of the crimes to the psychological profile of the murderer. Bold though that attempt was, we argued that it failed as a *whodunnit* (see Review of *Cards on the Table* on this blogsite). The clues did not work in providing the reader with a satisfying and soluble puzzle.

Crooked House however achieves much more effectively a satisfying puzzle in which most of the clues are about the psychology of the murderer. Unlike in *Cards on the Table*, however, I do not think that Christie was aiming to produce a set of psychological clues. These clues are instead a by-product of her rigorous approach to the question of what she has to do in order to be fair to the reader. This is especially important for plots that break a convention of the genre: otherwise readers will be apt to say of the solution 'that's not fair', and they would be right to say this unless the author has provided sufficient evidence for an astute reader to set aside the convention.

What Christie had been thinking about 'for years', I suspect, was how to write a *whodunnit* in which the murderer is a child. She well knew that, unless she was careful, readers including critics would say: 'I didn't consider Josephine as the murderer because she is only 11 or 12 years old'. It would be insufficient justification to respond that some children aged 11 years have, in fact, committed murder. Christie knew that she not only had to provide clues of the type she used in most of her novels. She would, in addition, have to make it plausible that this child would commit the murders. And plausible here means psychologically plausible. So Christie set out to do this and it is in making it plausible that Josephine, a child, *could* be the murderer that she provides the reader with most of the evidence that Josephine *is* the murderer. There are a few conventional clues but even if the reader picks these up they are insufficient to identify Josephine as the murderer with any degree of certainty. But a reader who notices the ways in which Christie suggests a child is capable of murder will ultimately realise with a high degree of probability that Josephine is the killer.

The key scene is section XII. The narrator, Charles Hayward, a man in his thirties is talking to his father who is Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard. "Dad", Charles says, "what are murderers like?" In the course of his long and thoughtful answer, Charles' father provides grounds for believing

that a child might commit murder. He says that the brake that operates with most of us to prevent us from killing doesn't operate with murderers. He goes on to say: "A child, you know, translates desire into action without compunction. A child is angry with its kitten, says 'I'll kill you,' and hits it on the head with a hammer – and then breaks its heart because the kitten doesn't come alive again! Lots of kids try to take a baby out of its pram and 'drown it', because it usurps attention – or interferes with their pleasures". He then goes on to adumbrate his views on the development of moral sensitivity: first children learn that things are wrong in the sense that they will be punished if they do them and only later do they develop a true moral sense and 'feel' that certain things are wrong. A couple of paragraphs later he mentions the real-life case of Constance Kent who (probably) murdered her baby half-brother when she was 16 years old. Later in the same discussion Charles' father turns to the question of heredity. "Take the de Haviland ruthlessness" he says, referring to the family of Josephine's grandmother, "and what we might call the Leonides unscrupulousness" referring to the family of Josephine's grandfather. "[T]he de Haviland's are all right because they're not unscrupulous, and the Leonides are all right because, though unscrupulous, they are kindly – but get a descendant who inherited both of those traits – see what I mean?" Charles' father makes one further point about a murderer's psychology: "a murderer wants to talk ... if you can't talk about how you did it, you can at least talk about the murder itself – discuss it, advance theories – go over it. If I were you, Charles, I should look out for that."

It is in section XII that Christie does most of the groundwork of preparing the reader for a child murderer. But not all. Towards the end of the book (section XXIII) Josephine's brother, Eustace, who is 15 years old, is seriously considered as the possible murderer. It is not that large a step to then consider his younger sister Josephine. And there is one further significant brief discussion between Charles and his father. Charles suggests that a mother could not try and kill her own child. His father clearly thinks Charles naïve: "don't you ever read the police news?" he asks. Christie may be slyly helping the reader to think the unthinkable: not only that a mother might murder her child but that a child might kill her grandfather.

So has Christie made the solution too obvious? Christie's skill at misdirection and her almost unerring judgement as to how to walk the line between making clues too obvious to be puzzling or too obscure to be fair do not desert her here. At each point in section XII where she provides the reader with grounds for considering Josephine the murderer she distracts the reader's attention. Charles' father uses the discussion of the moral development of children not to make the point that children can murder but that adult murderers are morally immature. The reader's attention is diverted to thinking which adults in the story might be morally immature. At the end of the speech about heredity Charles' father says "But I shouldn't

worry your head about heredity. It's much too tricky and complicated." And even if the reader does 'worry his or her head about heredity' the focus is likely to be on Josephine's uncle or father or her siblings, all of whom share the same potentially toxic hereditary mix. Finally, at the end of the conversation Charles' father puts Charles and the reader off the scent: "There's a cold-blooded killer somewhere in that household. The child Josephine appears to know most of what is going on ... But take care of her. She may know a little too much for somebody's safety".

Readers might balk at the solution not on the grounds that children are psychologically incapable of committing murder but because they are not sufficiently knowledgeable to conceive of the mechanism for the murder of Aristide Leonides – putting eye-drop medication into the insulin bottle. Christie deals with this possible criticism by having the victim himself say in front of the whole family that he could be killed by making such a substitution. In fact he does so in response to Josephine's asking him why his medication says: "eye drops – not to be taken".

In addition to the general clues that a child might be the murderer Christie's sketches of Josephine's character are intended, I imagine, to make it plausible that Josephine could be such a child. She is described by Brenda (Aristide Leonides' young second wife) as having 'horrible sneaky ways she gives me the shivers sometimes'. When asked by Charles whether she liked her grandfather (the victim) Josephine replies: "Not particularly. I didn't like him much. He stopped me learning to be a ballet dancer". We see her as precocious, arrogant, and egotistical and as treating the murders of her grandfather and nannie as really rather fun – as excuses for an enjoyable game of sleuthing.

Once the possibility is seriously considered that Josephine, a child, could be the murderer then that solution becomes increasingly obvious. A reader who hits on this possibility should feel almost certain that it is the correct solution and therefore this novel meets the *cryptic crossword clue* criterion for a satisfying whodunnit. In addition to the evidence, discussed above, that Josephine is capable of murder there are sufficient clues that she is the murderer for the solution to be convincing. First and foremost, following the advice that Charles' father gives, she is the person who talks by far the most about the murder. Indeed this Christie could be solved using the method that we have suggested elsewhere is often sound: that the murderer is the character who is most often 'on stage' and who, apart from the main detective, has the the largest part in the novel. Other weaker clues are that Josephine predicts the second murder, and that she seems remarkably calm about the apparently high probability that she herself will be murdered. One factor that could point either way is the supposed attempt on Josephine's life. Josephine is hit on the head by a marble door-stop placed on top of the door to the old wash-house. It looks like an attempt on her life but although

she seems to suffer concussion the head injury turns out not to be serious. Within the context of a whodunnit it is always suspicious when an apparent attempt at murder fails to be effective. The apparent victim will become a suspect. But the mechanism here would be very hard to control and if Josephine had set this up to look like an attempt on her life (as indeed she had) she risked serious injury and possible death. This is the one significant weakness in the plot. Christie's attempt to deal with this is not wholly convincing. She writes: "An almost incredible performance considering that she might easily have killed herself. But then, childlike, she had never considered such a possibility. She was the heroine. The heroine isn't killed."

Charles in reviewing possible clues that he had missed mentions the fact that traces of earth had been found on the seat of the old chair in the wash-house as though someone had stood on it. Josephine was the only person who would have had to climb up on a chair to balance the marble on top of the door. A perhaps better clue for the reader, though Charles does not mention it, is that the mechanism for the two successful murders involved poison so if a murderer had wanted to kill Josephine it seems odd that she or he would have chosen the very different and unreliable method of marble balanced on the top of a door.

There is one strange point in the novel that has nothing to do with the murder plot but appears to be a rare example of Agatha Christie making a mistake. Aristide Leonides' first wife who was the sister of Edith de Haviland and the grandmother, on their father's side, of Sophia, Eustace and Josephine, died of pneumonia in 1905 (section III). Sophia, who is in her 20's during the 1940's, says that she "only just remembers her grandmother" (section IV). Perhaps Sophia is referring to her *mother's* mother but from the context it appears not. In the first place she has just been talking about her grandfather, Aristide, and seems to be carrying on talking about the same side of the family. In the second place she refers to this grandmother's 'fox-hunting forebears' and we have already been told that Aristide's first wife was the daughter of a country squire who was a Master of Fox-Hounds. In the third place no (other) mention is ever made of her mother's parents.

In several of her novels Christie raises questions about the degree of criminal responsibility and the appropriate punishment for her murderers. This is the first time that these issues have arisen in the context of a child murderer. It is Edith de Haviland who takes the law into her own hands. She herself has a terminal disease. She realises, before the other characters realise, that Josephine is the murderer. She takes Josephine for a ride in her car and crashes the car, on purpose, killing them both. In one of the letters she leaves behind she writes: "The action I am about to take may be right or wrong I do not know". Her justification for killing Josephine is to save her from her inevitable suffering if she is 'called to earthly account for what she

has done'. Given Josephine's callous character it seems unlikely that she will suffer much from feelings of guilt. Given her youth she will rightly be held less culpable than would an adult. This combined with her family's wealth means that it is unlikely that the punishment or treatment that she would be given would be so unpleasant as to justify her being murdered. Edith de Haviland in killing Josephine commits the most culpable murder in the novel.

The book ends with considerations of genetics, character and responsibility. Charles tells the reader: "I still felt a fondness for [Josephine] .. You do not like anyone less because they have tuberculosis or some other fatal disease. Josephine was .. a little monster, but she was a pathetic little monster. She had been born with a kink – the crooked child of the little Crooked House."

Sophia wonders whether Charles will still want to marry her, given this 'genetic kink' in her family. She does not have to wonder for long. Now the murder mystery is solved we can return to romance. Charles reassures her: "In poor little Josephine all the worst of the family came together. In you, Sophia, I fully believe that all that is bravest and best in the Leonides family has been handed down to you. Hold up your head, my darling. The future is ours." Romance and optimism. Just what the reader needs after the dark plot of three murders and a suicide.

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