

## A Murder in Announced

1950

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

Agatha Christie, apparently, did not approve of Lesbianism. *A Murder is Announced* is the first of her novels in which she portrays a lesbian couple who live together in a long-term relationship. There is no sign of any authorial disapproval. Christie, right from the beginning of her literary career, took seriously the advice from a friend that in writing novels she should show, not preach. The couple in question, Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd are sympathetically drawn. Miss Hinchcliffe has elements of a type that Christie seems to admire: intelligent, capable, down-to-earth, no-nonsense, and fundamentally kind. Miss Murgatroyd is murdered. It is one of those rare murders in Christie that leaves the reader feeling distinctly sad.

The first Miss Marple novel was published between the wars in 1930; the next was published during the Second World War in 1942. *A Murder is Announced* is the third Miss Marple novel to be published. It appeared in 1950. The social fabric of English village life has changed significantly since Miss Marple's appearance in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, as Miss Marple explains: "Fifteen years ago one *knew* who everybody was ... They were people whose fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers, or whose aunts and uncles, had lived there before them. If somebody new came, well, they stuck out – everybody wondered about them and didn't rest till they found out. ... But it's not like that any more."

Time, however, has had little effect on Miss Marple herself. Half way through *A Murder is Announced*, at the start of what is one of the most significant chapters in the book (chapter 13) we see Miss Marple come out of the Vicarage gate and walk down the 'little lane' that leads to the main street. She pauses near *The Bluebird Tearooms and Café* where the "somewhat euphemistically named 'Home Made Cakes' are a bright saffron colour". When she sees Dora Bunner entering the café, Miss Marple decides that what she needs to counteract the cold wind is a nice cup of morning coffee. The two ladies sit together and start talking of rheumatism, sciatica and neuritis. "A sulky-looking girl in a pink overall with a flight of bluebirds down the front of it took their order for coffee and cakes with a yawn and an air of weary patience." Miss Marple, as so often, lowers the guard of her companion, and of the reader, by exaggerating her own fluffiness. And after the 'sulky girl' puts down their coffee 'with a clatter' Miss Marple turns the conversation to Dora Bunner's long friendship with Miss Blacklock. The ensuing conversation is highly significant for both the reader and Miss Marple providing as it does key clues to the identity of Miss Blacklock. It is difficult, however, for the reader to make these out, hidden as they are in the fog of froth in which they are embedded. The conversation is, of course, of most significance for poor Dora Bunner.

*A Murder is Announced* is technically one of Christie's most accomplished novels. It provides an excellent case study for the examination of the many elements that Christie uses in setting a whodunnit puzzle and in masking its solution. Her plots, and her prose, can flow so apparently effortlessly that the reader is unaware of the careful complexity that has gone in

to the telling of the tale. Christie's skill in her craft is a pleasure to analyse, like watching a fine furniture-maker at work.

It is not simply a question of scattering a novel with a few clues to the correct solution. Christie's clues are concealed in various ways. False clues of different types are strategically placed. Neither is the main puzzle – the one revealed at the denouement – the only puzzle to intrigue the reader. The page-turning quality is maintained by the posing, and revealing, of lesser puzzles that keep the reader on her toes from beginning to end. In constructing her puzzles Christie makes use of various elements – we can identify ten – that she deploys with imagination and skill.

The first element is the central idea or ideas: the main plot device that is the kernel of the puzzle.

Second is the central plot. This includes the central ideas but also their further elaboration. The central plot provides the motivations and mechanisms for the murders, and specifies the relevant central characters such as murderer and victims.

Third are the true clues, that is the clues to the central plot.

Fourth are the one or more red-herring plots: stories not vital to the central plot that are used to mislead the reader by providing a context for further characters who will be suspects, and for the fifth element, the red-herring clues.

Red-herring clues look as though they may be important in understanding the central plot, and in identifying the murderer, but they are in fact clues to a red-herring plot.

The sixth element are false clues – points in the story that a reader may think are clues but are irrelevant to the central plot and to any of the red-herring plots.

The seventh element is misdirection. Misdirections show us Christie, the conjuror. Misdirections are quite distinct from red-herring clues and false clues because they are not clues at all. Misdirections are tricks to distract the reader from noticing true clues. They come in several forms.

The driving force for the reader of a well constructed Christie novel is not only the solving of the central puzzle. There are smaller puzzles for the reader to solve along the way, and these may relate either to red-herring plots or the central plot itself.

The eighth element, therefore, of a Christie whodunit are the clues and then the revelation of part or all of the red-herring plots. Red-herring plots may serve not only to lead the reader astray in the attempt to solve the central puzzle but also to provide mysteries that are unveiled before the denouement. Often this unveiling will take the reader back to square one: the reader thinks she has solved the central plot only to find that what she has solved is a red-herring plot. In short, red-herring plots can be used to enable what one might call 'stepping stone mysteries' – mysteries along the way of the novel that help to sustain interest and that intrigue the reader.

The ninth element takes us back to the central plot. It is not only the red-herring plots that can be revealed along the way. Aspects of the central plot might also be revealed before the denouement.

For the sake of completion we should identify the tenth element as the denouement itself – that moment of drama to which the reader knows the novel is heading. The eighth and ninth elements provide the reader with motivation and enchantment along the way, but the journey ends with the denouement itself.

*A Murder is Announced* is constructed around two **central ideas**. The first is about identity. The murderer presents herself as Miss Letitia Blacklock – Lettie – but is in fact Miss Charlotte Blacklock – Lottie – who is Lettie’s sister. If the reader does not tumble to this then the motive for the first, and key, murder will be impossible to understand.

The second central idea is one that Christie has used before: that it should look as though the murder was a failed attempt to kill the person who is in fact the murderer. In other words that the actual murderer appears to be the intended victim.

These central ideas can be compared to those ambiguous drawings so loved by Gestalt psychologists. Such a drawing might be seen as a duck or as a rabbit but not as both at the same time. Without practice it can be difficult to change the way in which the picture is seen. Christie frames the novel so that the reader sees a rabbit, but to find the solution the reader needs to see a duck, or two ducks in this case. It can be very satisfying for a reader to change the gestalt, to have that ‘Aha’ moment: suppose Miss Blacklock was not the intended victim, or, even better, suppose Miss Blacklock is not Lettie but Lottie. A good central idea encourages the reader to make an assumption that prevents the solution from being seen. Only if that assumption is questioned – only if the reader realises that the picture could be construed as a duck instead of a rabbit - can the mystery be solved.

Although these central ideas provide the kernel of the novel there is a great deal for the author to do in order to flesh out the **central plot**. There needs to be motive and mechanism for the murder, and a cast of characters. The significance of the false identity is that Miss Letitia Blacklock, had she lived, would soon inherit a fortune from her previous employer, Mr Goedler. But Letitia has died, of natural causes, before the novel opens. Letitia’s sister, Charlotte, assumes the identity of Letitia so that she will inherit the fortune. The author has to work out or invent further details, for example, the motive for the first murder and the number of subsequent murders.

Christie’s second central idea - that the murder looks as though it was an attempt to kill Miss Blacklock - provides the skeleton for the main **red-herring plot**. This plot concerns ‘Pip and Emma’ - the children of Mr Goedler’s sister, Sonia, who stand to inherit the fortune if Miss Letitia Blacklock dies before Mrs Goedler. Little is known of Pip and Emma. They will now be young adults. Christie cleverly turns this into an intriguing puzzle by misleadingly framing the whodunnit puzzle as: ‘which of the young adults in the novel are Pip and/or Emma?’ Along the way she has fun tricking the reader into falsely believing that Pip is male.

Although both Pip and Emma do turn out to be residents in the village, they are irrelevant to the central plot.

In many detective novels there are simply one or two independent clues to the central plot. In a good Christie novel, not only are there many clues, but not all the clues are independent: some are helpful only when taken in conjunction with further clues. For example, one major group of clues to Miss Blacklock's identity concerns Charlotte Blacklock's 'deformity'. This group consists of seven clues which fall into three sets.

The first set consists of just one clue: that Charlotte Blacklock - the sister who is supposed to be dead - had a 'deformity' of some kind.

The second set consists of three clues as to what that deformity might be. The first two clues are closely related: that Miss Blacklock and her sister stayed in Montreux for a few months during the war, and that Miss Blacklock and her sister went to a sanatorium in Switzerland. The third clue is in the long letter that Inspector Craddock found in the attic of Miss Blacklock's house, a letter from some time ago that Letitia Blacklock had written to her sister, Charlotte. Letitia writes: "This iodine treatment may make a lot of difference. I've been enquiring about it and it really does seem to have good results".

The third set consists of three clues that, if correctly interpreted, suggest that Miss Blacklock has some mark on her neck that she wishes to hide. The three clues are: first that Miss Blacklock always wears a choker round her neck and this is clearly incongruous with the rest of her apparel; second that she is quite extraordinarily distraught when this choker breaks - and runs immediately from the room her hand to her throat; and third that her hand goes to the choker when talking of Charlotte (who is assumed to be her sister).

These clues are perhaps more difficult for a modern young reader than they were for readers in 1950. Modern treatments of thyroid disease have greatly reduced the prevalence of enlarged thyroid gland which is seen as a swollen-looking neck known as goitre. Goitre due to iodine deficiency was well known in the 1950's. "Derbyshire neck" was one name commonly used in Britain. Derbyshire was a source of rock salt and most salt consumed by those living in Derbyshire was from that source. This rock salt, unlike sea salt, contained no iodine. By the 1950s iodine was added to most commercially sold salt and this was clearly labelled as such. I remember my mother insisting that we buy only salt with added iodine (iodised salt) in order to prevent goitre. Furthermore, in the 1950s, Switzerland was well-known as being the world centre for thyroid surgery. One of Christie's strengths as a whodunnit writer is her ability to judge how to make clues fair, but not too obvious. But of course this balance can change - and date. For a modern reader these clues about goitre might be too obscure.

There are further clues that Miss Blacklock is Lotty and not Lettie and that have nothing to do with her neck. One of the clues is very subtle although in an indirect way Miss Marple does draw attention to it. This is that Lettie spelt 'enquiring' with an 'e' (as evidenced by the letter mentioned above) whereas the Miss Blacklock who is alive throughout the novel spells 'inquiries' with an 'i'. Miss Marple states that people don't often alter their spelling as they get older. I am sceptical of this and indeed I have used both spellings over the years.

Another clue is less subtle but also weak. Miss Blacklock has never visited Mrs Goestler since her return to Britain just over a year ago. If Miss Blacklock were Lettie, but not if she were Lottie, one would have expected her to have visited.

The best clues to the fact that Miss Blacklock is Lottie and not Lettie occur in one scene – the conversation between Miss Marple and Miss Blacklock’s friend, and poor companion, Dora Bunner in *The Bluebird Tearooms and Café*. Dora Bunner is the only person who knows the true identity of Miss Blacklock. She approves of the deception and thinks that Lottie Blacklock is justified in pretending to be her sister in order to inherit Mr Goestler’s fortune. Dora Bunner however is quite unaware that Miss Blacklock has murdered Rudi Scherz.

In that crucial conversation amongst the yellow cakes and pink aprons what the astute Miss Marple realises is that much of what Dora Bunner says about Miss Blacklock would be appropriate if applied to Charlotte Blacklock but not if applied to Letitia. The most solid clue, obvious when noticed but not easy to notice, is when on one occasion Dora Bunner slips up and refers to Miss Blacklock as Lottie instead of Lettie. Two further clues are that Dora Bunner says of Miss Blacklock “she was such a pretty girl and it all seems so sad, sad affliction bravely borne”. There is nothing we know of Letitia that fits with this. However we know that Charlotte has some ‘deformity’ that might justify such a statement. The second is that Dora Bunner says that Miss Blacklock is not a ‘woman of the world’. Again this seems quite untrue of Letitia but fitting with the shy and retiring Charlotte.

There are further clues that Miss Blacklock is the murderer that have nothing to do with the issue of identity. The best relate to the rather complex mechanism of the first murder. One function of this complexity is to make it look as though the actual murderer were the intended victim. A second, literary, function is to provide a dramatically arresting scene near the start of the novel. A third function is that the unravelling of the mechanism of the first murder becomes one of those puzzles and solutions that are not part of the denouement but that add interest and enticement along the way. Gradually more and more is revealed. The mystery of the recently oiled door looks as though it is going to be important. For several chapters this is the puzzle that appears to be at the centre of the plot. But when we finally understand, this understanding, far from making the solution easier, greatly increases the number of possible suspects. Indeed in one fell swoop almost everyone becomes a possible suspect.

Another element of the central plot that Christie sets as a puzzle for the reader is the mechanism by which the lights suddenly go out just before the murder. Christie provides clues – a fizzing sound the moment before the lights go out, a burn mark on a table as though made by a lighted cigarette, only no one was smoking when the mark must have been made; a dry vase of dying violets, and a lamp in the room that has been swapped for another lamp after the murder took place. Finally, Christie gives the reader a strong hint when a cat named Tiglath Pileser, knocks over a jug of water and fuses the lights. All this is an intriguing mystery for the reader to solve but it is not part of the denouement. And solving this mystery of the mechanism does not help the reader in identifying the murderer. At least not at first sight. But as so often with Christie, the clues are even more clever than they seem. It is possible for the reader to be pretty sure who the murderer is after understanding the mechanism by which the lights were put out, but to do so the reader will

need to remember points from earlier in the novel and to realise their significance. Once it is realised that it was important to the murderer that the lights went out it becomes clear that the murder depended on the room, where the guests were gathered, being pitch dark at the time of the murder. The murder occurred at 6.30 pm and we are told that at the time of year the novel is set it goes dark at 6pm.

For the room to be dark it would be necessary that no fire was burning in the grate. Early in the novel the point is laboured, with humour as a distraction, that it was very surprising to all those gathered at the party that the fire was not lit – and that instead the house was being kept warm by central heating. In Britain in 1950 rationing, including fuel rationing, was still in place following the Second World War. To reduce the use of fuel it seems that it was the norm for the living room to be heated by a single coal fire until the weather got sufficiently cold to justify heating the whole house with central heating. Virtually every visitor remarked to Miss Blacklock that she had the central heating on early instead of having a coal fire in the one room where they were all gathered. The murder had been carefully planned. Crucial to the plan was that the fire should not be lit since, if it were, it would give off a significant amount of light thus exposing the mechanism of the murder and the identity of the murderer. Only Miss Blacklock, as the house owner, was in a position to determine that contrary to the expectation of her neighbours the central heating was on, and no fire was lit.

For those who solve *whodunnits* on the basis of conventions of the genre, rather than using the logic of the clues, there is a one-step thought to identifying the murderer. If the person who appears to be the intended victim is not seriously harmed then that person is the murderer. A reader who for this reason correctly identifies Miss Blacklock as the murderer will still need to puzzle out the central plot and the central idea.

As we have seen different elements of the central plot can play different roles – some elements are clued and revealed as the story progresses, some are reserved for the final denouement. In addition to the true clues there are **the red-herring clues** and false clues. In *A Murder is Announced* the principal red-herring plot, as we have seen, concerns ‘Pip and Emma’. Christie clues this red-herring plot more carefully than many writers clue their central plots. There is a further, and much more minor, red-herring plot to do with Phillipa Haymes and her husband.

Most of the misleading ‘clues’ are clues to one of the red-herring plots. But Christie also puts in a smattering of what we have called **false clues** – points in the story that a reader may note, thinking that they are clues but which in fact are not. For example just after Murgatroyd and Hinchcliffe have been interviewed by the police, following the first murder, Murgatroyd says: “Oh, Hinch, was I very awful? I do get flustered!” Hinchcliffe replies: “Not at all. On the whole I should say you did very well”. The reader is likely to wonder what secret these two are hiding. Later we are told that Dora Bunner will inherit a significant amount of money when Miss Blacklock dies – giving her a motive for killing Miss Blacklock. Christie like a good poker player even tricks those readers who think they know her. When Sergeant Fletcher realises that the door was mysteriously oiled in order to enable someone to leave the drawing-room when the lights went out he muses to himself: “That ruled out

Mitzi who wouldn't have needed to use the door". Christie buffs would immediately think that Mitzi is all the more suspicious. But, in fact, Fletcher is right and Mitzi is innocent.

Clues, whether true clues, red-herring clues, or false clues are crucial to the puzzle of a *whodunnit*, but they are only half the story. The other half are the **misdirections**. And here Christie is as adept as she is with clueing. A conjuror can misdirect audiences by distracting their gaze from where they might see something suspicious, or they may misdirect by telling the story around the trick in a way that gets the audience to see the trick in the wrong way – from the wrong perspective. Christie uses the literary equivalents of both methods. It is important for Christie to ensure that the reader believes that Miss Blacklock is the intended victim. She does not rely only on what Miss Blacklock herself does to foster that belief, such as the blood under her ear after the shooting or the bullet holes being close to where she was standing just before the lights went out. Christie also uses various devices in the way she tells her story to reinforce this misleading perspective. For example, about a third of the way into the novel Miss Marple explains the mechanism for the murder. The reader knows Miss Marple is correct and will start to think how this knowledge of the mechanism can help identify the murderer. And, straight away, the trusted Miss Marple says to the chief constable: "You'll have to find out from Miss Blacklock who wanted to kill her". A few pages later Inspector Craddock says to his superior, and this is written in italics for greater emphasis: "*Somebody tried to murder Miss Blacklock. Now, why?*" The reader is likely to start trying to answer the question, *why?* rather than doubt that Miss Blacklock was the intended victim. Again, as soon as the mystery of the oiled door is cleared up Miss Blacklock says to Inspector Craddock: "And you believe that one of those people – one of my nice commonplace neighbours – slipped out and tried to murder me? *Me?* But *why?* For goodness' sake, *why?*" The fact that Miss Blacklock is sceptical makes this misdirection of the reader's perspective all the more powerful. There then follows a discussion of who could have the motive to kill Miss Blacklock. She tells the Inspector that she will one day be rich. She explains that she used to be secretary to Mr Goedler and that since he had no children he left his considerable fortune in trust for his wife during her lifetime and after her death to Miss Blacklock absolutely. The Inspector then asks the question that will be on the mind of many readers at this point: "what happens (to the fortune) if you should predecease Mrs Goedler?". And this is the beginning of the red-herring plot involving Pip and Emma. The reader has plenty to think about without stopping to consider whether Miss Blacklock were not the intended victim. The passage ends with Craddock saying to Miss Blacklock, "I think somebody shot at you with the intent to kill you", the point is made again a few pages later: "Because of the oiled door, Craddock knew that there had been somebody in Letitia Blacklock's drawing room who was not the pleasant friendly country neighbour he or she pretended to be .."

There is another method Christie uses to direct the reader's gaze away from the murderer. She employs this so often in her novels that a Christie aficionado might learn to spot it and to use it to help identify the murderer. The method usually involves one of the detectives making a list of possible suspects – a list that does not include the murderer. Such lists occur twice in *A Murder is Announced*.

Manipulating the reader's perspective in these ways is one method for misdirection, but a reader who notices the true clues may still solve the puzzle. So immediately after a true clue

has been given Christie distracts the reader with some point or discussion that grabs the reader's attention. For example, an important clue is when the choker of pearls around Miss Blacklock's neck breaks and she is quite extraordinarily upset, with 'agony in her voice'. She rushes from the room, her hand to her throat. Phillipa says that she has never seen Miss Blacklock so upset over anything. The reason of course is that she is terrified that Inspector Craddock will see the scar on her neck. Christie distracts the reader from realising her motive when Phillipa suggests that the reason for her being upset might be because the pearls had been a present from someone special, and Inspector Craddock wonders whether the pearls might have been real – sufficiently valuable to provide a motive for killing Miss Blacklock. If either of these explanations were correct, one would expect Miss Blacklock to pick up the pearls rather than rush from the room, but many readers will accept that one of these explanations is the true one and not notice the important clue.

Much earlier in the novel we learn that Rudi Scherz had been a hospital orderly in Berne in Switzerland, a significant point if taken in conjunction with the clues about Charlotte Blacklock's deformity and operation, but the discussion turns immediately to his petty thieving. When we learn that the two Miss Blacklocks went to a sanatorium in Switzerland, again a significant clue, the discussion immediately reverts to the question of Miss Blacklock's inheritance.

Christie uses a further method of misdirection: hiding important clues in froth. The prime example of this in *A Murder is Announced* is the conversation between Dora Bunner and Miss Marple in *The Bluebird Tearooms and Café*.

Attempts to solve the mystery of the murder of Rudi Scherz are directly responsible for the subsequent two murders. Miss Hinchliffe can be forgiven for encouraging her friend and partner, Miss Murgatroyd, to try and remember exactly what happened at the moment of Rudi Scherz's murder. It is much more difficult to forgive Miss Marple. She quite knowingly leads Dora Bunner to speak about issues that might be germane to the murder of Rudi Scherz – and this is in the public space of the *The Bluebird Tearooms and Café*. Dora Bunner says too much. She is overheard by Miss Blacklock and subsequently murdered. Miss Marple is clever enough to realise the causative role that her nosiness has played in Miss Bunner's death. But she is not going to lose any sleep over it. 'I'm afraid' she admits, 'that that conversation with me in the café really sealed Dora's fate – if you'll excuse such a melodramatic expression. But I think it would have come to the same in the end . . . Because life couldn't be safe for Charlotte while Dora Bunner was alive.'

How easily Miss Marple lets herself off the moral hook! And who is she trying to kid? With her intelligence she might well have solved the mystery, without the conversation in the café, or by choosing a private place for the chat, before Charlotte Blacklock had accumulated sufficient reasons to kill Miss Bunner. Miss Marple's sleuthing on this occasion has done more harm than good.

[TH]



### Note on the sequence of events

The sequence of events in *A Murder is Announced* seems to be roughly as follows. Charlotte was born around 1884. She had goitre by the time she was a teenager. Charlotte probably started iodine treatment around 1920 when she was in her late thirties. The iodine treatment did not significantly reduce the goitre – which is not surprising since she would, by then, have had goitre for many years. Dr Blacklock, father of Charlotte and Letitia, died in 1935 or 1936 or perhaps a year or two later. He was a conservative doctor who had not allowed Charlotte to be assessed for surgery for her goitre. After Dr Blacklock's death Letitia gave up her job with Randall Goedler to look after her sister. She took Charlotte to Switzerland to a sanatorium 'just before the war' - presumably some time in 1939 (p.155) - where Charlotte's goitre was removed by surgery. Letitia died in Switzerland probably in 1946 or 1947 just over a year before the novel opens.

Charlotte's operation for goitre was carried out in "Dr Adolf Koch's clinic in Berne". This seems a thinly disguised reference to Dr Kocher in Berne even though Kocher died in 1917. Dr Albert Kocher, Theodor's son, was also a surgeon. He died in 1941. Kocher's name is given to the position and shape of the incision which would have been used to remove (part of) Charlotte's thyroid. This would have left her with a scar as seen below – one that could be hidden by a choker of imitation pearls.

