4.50 from Paddington
1957

[US title: **What Mrs McGillicuddy Saw!]**

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

I must admit to having a soft spot for *4.50 from Paddington*, not from reading the book but from the film of the novel made by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1961 with the title *Murder, She Said*. I remember seeing the trailer in my local cinema when I was ten years old and begging my parents to be taken to watch the film the following week. The trailer shows Miss Marple travelling on a steam train. Another train runs parallel, a local 'stopping' train judging from the fact that it is made of individual compartments with no corridor between them. Miss Marple is looking into these compartments as they slowly pass the window of her carriage. A girl sticks out her tongue, and Miss Marple copies the insulting gesture. At the next compartment the leather blinds of all three windows are down. We cannot look inside. And then the blind of one of the windows shoots up and we see a woman being strangled, gloved hands around her neck. Miss Marple turns to face us: "Now you saw that didn't you, didn't you? Do you think anyone will believe us?". And so we become complicit in the plot. (The trailer is available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uv34UJPcJoo])

Christie was not fond of this film. She thought it lacked any sense of danger. She was right. The trailer describes the film as a 'Murderously funny thriller' and states that it 'mixes murder with mirth'. It is the humour that is emphasized, and reasonably so: there is little sense of thrill in the novel.

There are two coincidences in *Murder, She Said*. The principal setting of the book is *Rutherford Hall* – the home of the cantankerous Mr Crackenthorpe. I can find no evidence that Agatha Christie chose that title, in 1957, knowing that four years later Miss Marple would be played by Margaret Rutherford. The second coincidence is that the part of Mr Crackenthorpe's cook, Mrs Kidder, is played by Joan Hickson, who, twenty-three years later, played Miss Marple in a TV series.

Margaret Rutherford went on to make three further Miss Marple films. The second in the series is loosely based on *After the Funeral* – a much better novel than *4.50 from Paddington*. The film, titled *Murder at the Gallop* is a travesty: Marple is substituted for Poirot; the setting is completely changed; and the very clever plotting and clueing of the novel are lost. It is, however, worth watching if only for the comic timing and facial expressions of Rutherford and her co-star, the wonderfully British Robert Morley, and for the performance of the then recently knighted stage and film actor, Dame Flora Robson.

There has not, to my mind, been an actor who has inhabited the role of Miss Marple with anything like the perfection of David Suchet's embodiment of Poirot. Each of the actors has brought to her performance something of Marple's character and behaviour, but none combines her strange mix of sweetness, humour, acidity, coldness and intelligence in a convincing and entertaining manner.

In *The Body in the Library* Miss Marple is said to 'twinkle benignly', and in *A Pocket Full of Rye* to look like an amiable cockatoo. She can be kind, and in *4.50 from Paddington* she is affectionate towards Inspector Craddock, whose godfather is Marple's old friend, Sir Henry Clithering. She can be brave in a way that Poirot never is. But she can also be extraordinarily cold, callous and harsh, often caring little about the death of some unfortunate innocent, particularly if the victim is not very bright. In *A Murder is Announced* she shows no remorse for having, by her behaviour, caused the death of one of the characters. In *4.50 from Paddington* she realises the pattern of the murders before the final two victims have been killed but she takes no action to prevent those deaths. She is no lover of humankind and generally assumes the worst of people having, as her nephew says, a mind like a sink.

Miss Marple often conceals her intelligence in a fluffy, self-deprecating manner, playing up her role as an elderly spinster who lives a quiet and unassuming life in a small English village. This manner provides some of the humour in the novels. Further humour results from her use of analogies: from how she sees resemblances between murder suspects and people from her village. My favourite screen Miss Marple remains Margaret Rutherford, perhaps because she was the first I encountered. Rutherford is hardly 'tall and thin' which is how Christie describes Marple, but she conveys Marple's toughness and intelligence whilst also hinting at the fussy manner. Above all, there is a twinkle and a humour in her performances which are a pleasure to watch.

For many people, Joan Hickson is the best Marple. She certainly captures the coldness and harshness but I do not enjoy watching her: she is too cold, utterly lacking in humour, with a monotonous voice and a look as though there is a bad smell permanently under her nose. The Miss Marple of the novels inspires affection from others, but it is difficult to understand how that could be true of Hickson's depiction.

Geraldine McEwan, in the more recent TV series, plays up the twittering and the humour and certainly has a twinkle in her eye, but the steely intelligence is lacking. Many may think Julia McKenzie, who took over from McEwan in the later episodes, a good compromise. She, again, is too much on the cold and humourless side for my taste although several degrees warmer than Hickson. Perhaps the best depiction is Angela Lansbury's portrayal, combining intelligence, ruthlessness and humour, in the 1980 Guy Hamilton film of *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (called simply *The Mirror Crack'd*).

But what of the novel? It is interesting to speculate on the originating inspiration for each of Christie's books. The inspirations are usually, I suspect, the plot devices that provide the mechanism for concealing the solution from the reader. *4.50 from Paddington*, however, originated, I imagine, from the brilliant and dramatic early scene when the first murder is observed – the scene that makes the trailer for *Murder, She Said* so effective. In the book it is Mrs McGillicuddy, not Miss Marple, who is travelling from London to the West Country when she witnesses, in the adjacent train, a murder that is happening only a few feet from her. She is, however, powerless to intervene. When no dead body is found either on the train or along the track only Miss Marple believes Mrs McGillicuddy's story.

The body is eventually found after Miss Marple narrows down its whereabouts to the grounds of Rutherford Hall. When Inspector Craddock says to Miss Marple: ‘you outsmarted [the police] by a most fantastic process of guesswork’ Marple says: ‘*Not* guesswork. …. My own process of reasoning was not really original. .. It's all in Mark Twain. The boy who found the horse. He just imagined where he would go if he were a horse and he went there and there was the horse’. Craddock understands immediately: ‘You imagined what you'd do if you were a cruel and cold-blooded murderer?’

Although the woman's body is found, no one seems to know who she is. From her undergarments it seems that she might have been French, which gives Christie the opportunity to poke fun at the all too common xenophobic attitudes of the English. Late in the novel Craddock discusses the question of the identity of the dead woman with Miss Marple. ‘Come, tell me,’ said Craddock, ‘do you or do you not think you know who the murdered woman was?’ Miss Marple replies: ‘It's so difficult to put it the right way. I mean, I don't know *who* she was, but at the same time I'm fairly sure who she *was* ...’

Miss Marple's reply puts me in mind of the German philosopher, Frege, and his discussions of identity statements. The same object may sometimes be referred to by different descriptions or names. The ‘morning star’, to use one of Frege's examples, refers to a heavenly object that is seen at certain times in certain locations; and the ‘evening star’ refers to an object seen at different times. It turns out that the morning star and the evening star refer to the same object (the planet Venus) but this is only known as a result of careful empirical study. Although the morning star is identical to the evening star, the meaning of the terms *morning star* and *evening star* are different. Mark Twain provides an example of Frege's point that might have been of more interest to Miss Marple. The author Mark Twain is identical to the person Samuel Clemens but it is not necessarily the case that a statement that is true about Mark Twain is true if *Samuel Clemens* is substituted for *Mark Twain*. To give an example. It may be true that John believes that Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* but false that John believes that Samuel Clemens wrote *Huckleberry Finn*: John may have come across Samuel Clemens without realising that he is one and the same person as Mark Twain.

What I think Miss Marple meant by her reply to Craddock was that although she did not know *who* the dead woman was, in the sense that she did not know the dead woman's name, or much else about her, she nevertheless was fairly sure that she knew who she *was*, in that she knew one correct description about her: she was fairly sure that the dead woman had been Dr Quimper's wife.

One of the problems for a writer of whodunnits is to find the balance between making the solution too obvious and ensuring that it is fair. Christie was exceptionally good at finding that balance. But in this book I think she got it wrong. It is as though she was fearful that the solution was too obvious and as a result her clues are parsimonius and poor whereas her misdirections are rather skilful.

When we first meet Dr Quimper he is described as ‘a tall genial man, with a casual off-hand cynical manner that his patients found very stimulating’ thus lulling the reader into believing that he is basically a good chap. The moment when Quimper has the opportunity to poison

the Crackenthorpe family is deftly handled so that the reader is unlikely to remember it later. Lucy, the bright young woman sent by Miss Marple to spy on the Crackenthorpes, is about to take a jug of cocktails into the library. She meets Dr Quimper and tells him that the Crackenthorpes are ‘at it hammer and tongs’. Christie writes: ‘Dr Quimper’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed?” He took the jug from Lucy’s hand, opened the library door and went in.’ Dr Quimper is then immediately told off by Harold, one of the Crackenthorpe brothers, for having interfered in what Harold considered a private family matter. But Christie does not rely on the reader’s forgetting about the cocktail jug. When the Crackenthorpes, later that evening, succomb to arsenic poisoning, subsequent forensic analysis shows that it was the curry they ate for dinner that contained the poison. Dr Quimper had left the house before the curry was made and so appears no longer to be a suspect. Christie’s plotting here is rather clever. Dr Quimper was called back to the house later that night when several members of the family were taken ill from the poisoning, and it was then that he had the opportunity to put the arsenic in the remains of the curry that were later taken for forensic analysis. Any suspicion of Dr Quimper is again deflected, a couple of pages later, when he discusses with Lucy all the food that had been served that night. He appears to be the innocent doctor trying to work out how the poison could have been added.

The next murder is a kind of bluff. The tablets that kill Harold are sent to him in a small tablet box with a label on which is written: ‘Sent by request of Doctor Quimper’. Quimper denies sending it and the chemist whose label has been used also denies all knowledge of the tablets. And so the reader thinks that Doctor Quimper is being framed.

I have suggested in a previous analysis that one way to solve a Christie novel is to look for the character, other than the detective, who is ‘on stage’ for more time than any other character – the character to whom the author seems to have devoted most thought. In this novel that person is Lucy Eyelesbarrow who plays the part of Miss Marple’s helper. She owes something to those classic Christie heroines – such as Tuppence, Lady ‘Bundle’ Brent, and Lady Frances Derwent. But Lucy is a little different. Although she has a thirst for adventure and shows a lot of gumption and courage she is both more domestic, and more academic, than the classic Christie young women.

Lucy is 32 years old. She has taken a First from Oxford in Mathematics, has a brilliant mind and was confidently expected to take up an academic career. But she has in addition to scholarly brilliance ‘a core of good sound common sense’. Perhaps thinking of her (second) husband, the academic archaeologist Max Mallowan, Christie writes of Lucy: ‘She could not fail to observe that a life of academic distinction was singularly ill rewarded’. And she liked money. So Lucy realised that the serious shortage of any kind of skilled domestic labour was an opportunity. She becomes what she calls ‘a Professional Domestician’. She hires herself out, for a couple of weeks or so at a time, to take over all the domestic tasks. She ‘did everything, saw to everything, arranged everything’. Her niche was to take over managing a household, for example to allow wives to say to their husbands: ‘It will be all right. I *can* go with you to the States. *I’ve got Lucy Eyelesbarrow*.’

Miss Marple, who had met Lucy before, employs her to work at Rutherford Hall. It is she who finds the body of the woman strangled on the train and she is the eyes and ears for Miss Marple. Along the way she gets proposals of marriage from old Mr Crackenthorpe and

two of the younger generation. I am not sure whether Christie intended her to be a suspect – there is no hint that she has a motive for the murders – but there is one piece of evidence for Christie afficionadoes that she could not be the murderer: she was 'wonderful with dogs'.

Although there is much that is good in this novel, as a whodunnit it is ultimately disappointing. The clues are few, and several different solutions are possible: any one of the surviving Crackenthorpes had motive and opportunity. And it seems very unlikely that Dr Quimper would have confessed simply because of Mrs McGillicuddy's assertion that he is the man she saw briefly in the train, even if he did not realise that she could only have seen his back.

This is the first Christie book published after *The Homicide Act 1957* which limited captial punishment to only a few categories of murder. Capital punishment for all types of murder was finally abolished in the UK in 1965. In *The Body in the Library* Miss Marple says that she is pleased to think that the murderer is hanged. In *4.50 from Paddington* Marple says: 'I am really very, very sorry that they have abolished capital punishment because I do feel that if there is anyone who ought to hang, it's Dr Quimper', and Inspector Craddock replies: 'Hear, hear'. Since capital punishment was still legal in the case of someone who had committed two (or more) murders I am unclear why Miss Marple believes that Dr Quimper will not hang.

At the time of writing this novel, Christie was in difficulties with the inland revenue over tax. There are seven references to excessive taxation dispersed throughout the book. The last of these relates to Dr Quimper's motive for murder. Miss Marple says of him: 'Of course he was a greedy man. When he thought about taxation, and how much it cuts into income, he began thinking that it would be nice to have a good deal more capital.' One wonders whether Christie herself may have been a little more sympathetic than Miss Marple to Dr Quimper and the motives for his crimes.

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