

Cat Among the Pigeons

1959

[Plot spoilers for this book ahead]

Cat among The Pigeons is highly unusual in a number of ways. Christie is continuing to extend the genre; playing with the idea she first put forward in a previous book. Two separate murderers with different reasons to kill different people. In that book you only find out about the second main murderer right at the end, almost as an afterthought. In this book the idea of a second murderer is also extremely late, just before the dénouement, if you discount the 'murderer' as the plane engineer right at the beginning of the book, causing Prince Ali's private aeroplane to crash, in the revolution in Ramat.

The biggest authorial misdirection is the implicit assumption that in a whodunnit all crimes are perpetrated by a single person or people united by a common aim. There are no clues at all to there being two entirely distinct murderers, with separate motives, and a third group, unrelated to either of the others, responsible for the 'kidnapping' of 'Princess Shaista'. The reader can easily narrow down 'the murderer' to be one of the new Staff at Meadowbank School, as does Inspector Kelsey. By the end of the term there is only one of those three new recruits left alive. By a literal process of elimination, the murderer has to be the new school secretary, Ann Shapland. It is the second murderer that comes as a complete surprise. It is true that two of murders have different methods. The Police remark a skilled 'Professional hit man' must have performed the bullet in the heart first murder, whereas the second murder, death from a sandbag cosh on the head was more 'impulsive'. However, often in Christie novels a murderer uses different methods, as their plans go awry and they have to improvise with no time for planning. One feels it is justification after the fact, to deduce there are two different people on a killing spree in the Girls Boarding School, simply from this change in the murder method. Also, just before the denouement Mademoiselle Blanche is killed by a sandbag on the back of the head; the 'professional hit man' copying the modus operandi of the other murderer to cleverly throw suspicion in a different direction.

The School under-gardener Adam, a Secret Service agent, was suspicious of Ann Shapland early on: 'She's a cool customer and she's got brains.' Clearly neither Kelsey, nor the Secret Service who should know better, had follow through. Given Mrs. Upjohn mentions to the Headmistress on the first day of term about seeing someone at The School that Upjohn had worked with in the War connected with espionage, they should have made the connection, or at least cross checked with Intelligence files. Later Ann openly flirts with Adam and lets him know that she realises he is undercover in the 'C.I.D.', which should also have rung loud alarm bells. By the end of term both the new Sports and French Mistresses have met untimely ends. Miss Shapland is the only new member of Staff left. There is a half hearted red herring with the English Mistress who was 'off sick' the previous year, but Christie makes her into such a sensitive, intelligent character one likes her too much to be a murderer.

The second murderer is so unlikely a figure as to be preposterous, given the information the reader was given. Similarly the motive also seems inadequate, so the whole 'second murder' theme is completely unconvincing. Christie worked on the idea of two separate murderers through the 1950s, although in practice this seemed too difficult to write successfully: too many balls to juggle at one go without dropping a few. However it is impressive Christie kept trying.

Other parts of the book are much more successfully executed. The clues to the hoard of missing treasure are very fair, and scattered across the book like the

brilliantly flashing jewels themselves. The reader is told that Bob has 20 minutes to hide the jewels in his sister's luggage, at the start of the revolution in the Arab state of Ramat. You also know that a woman on the next door balcony sees exactly what he has done, and you know she was a spy by the way she immediately broke into Mrs. Sutcliffe's hotel room, after Bob had left it. There is a subtle clue that the jewels might actually not be in Mrs. Sutcliffe's luggage at all. Bob chose his niece, Jennifer, to be the unwitting 'mule', since Bob thought Jennifer was 'a self-centred child, who never saw or noticed anything outside herself.' This was correct, but Jennifer Sutcliffe prided herself on her tennis. In a letter to her mother from Meadowbank School, Jennifer asks 'could I have a new tennis racquet?' This clue was buried in the letter amongst the dross of a 15 year old writing home. The clue that the diamonds must be in the handle was that the racquet's balance has changed since they were in Ramat: 'it feels all wrong'.

Two people were killed, on separate occasions, in the Sports Pavilion where tennis racquets were stored. The two misdirections are that the Police search the girls' lockers, believing that the only hiding place in the Pavilion, and the murderer not knowing that Jennifer Sutcliffe and Julia Upjohn have swapped racquets.

A mysterious lady gives Jennifer Sutcliffe a new tennis racquet 'from her Aunt' but demands to take away the old one. Jennifer's best friend, Julia, rightly felt that was highly suspicious, like Aladdin's 'new lamps for old'. This is a literary echo of an Arabian night's tale, linking the racquet with Ramat in the reader's mind. Jennifer was so thrilled with a beautiful new racquet, she handed the old one over, without a second thought. Jennifer writes to thank her Aunt for the gift, and discovers the Aunt never sent it. Once the reader lines these clues up like a slot machine, there is in no doubt that Julia Upjohn would find the treasure. Jennifer's old racquet now belonged to Julia, and unlike Jennifer, Julia had an enquiring mind. It's a good piece of writing about two girls who are best friends; yet think so differently, each with their own strengths. The 15-year-old Julia Upjohn ran away from her boarding school to put the whole matter, and the hoard of jewels, before 'a family friend', Hercule Poirot, so bringing him neatly, but very late, into the story. One wonders if Christie thought she'd write this book without Poirot entirely, and then he suddenly appeared like the genii out of Aladdin's lamp, to solve the 'unsolvable' remaining strands of mystery, and provide an ending to the tale.

There are many clues to Princess *Shaista* being fraudulent, apart from the enormous clue of her name – shyster. Christie often humorously plays with names: compare characters from *They Do it With Mirrors* [1952] The Reverend Cannon Strete, and the whacky psychiatrist Dr Maverick.

There is a witty scene between the beautiful young Princess Shaista and two old withered spinsters: the Headmistress and the Matron, over inappropriate undergarments. Princess Shaista has an under-wired push-up bra, which shocked poor Matron. Miss Bulstrode, the Headmistress, says 'The girl looks fully mature. She might easily be over twenty by the look of her. And that is what she feels like.' It is odd, when Miss Bulstrode is supposed to be such a brilliant, shrewd headmistress that her own observations do not make her more suspicious about this girl under her care. Later on Bulstrode says of Princess Shaista 'she might be a woman of twenty-five'.

The clues are also fair that Mademoiselle Blanche, the new French Mistress, is an imposter, too. 'She's not a good teacher,' said Miss Bulstrode. 'Surprising really. Her testimonials were so good.' Again Miss Bulstrode failed very badly, making the correct observation but with no follow through. Bulstrode also does not think of this

after the first murder, when the Police are called in. Perhaps this is brilliant Christie writing to show that the best Headmistress in England really had burnt out, and should retire.

The most shocking thing in this novel is Poirot's bungled dénouement, where the murderer is allowed to kill again, in front of the Police and the Secret Service. This has not occurred in any previous Christie, although often Poirot allows the murderer to commit suicide rather than face a public trial and capital punishment by hanging. One might see this is the kindly Poirot 'allowing' one murderer to kill another, but this book is really about ineptitude of institutions, and their leaders or trustees to spot what might be going on. This is another horrific example. Perhaps by this stage in her writing career, Christie saw Poirot as another failing institution. Christie, can be seen developing the Institutional living theme throughout the 1950s from a rehabilitation centre for juvenile delinquents in *They Do It with Mirrors* [1952], to a world-class Scientific Research Establishment in *Destination Unknown* [1954], a student boarding house in *Hickory Dickory Dock* [1955], and the top girls' Boarding School in England in this novel [1959]. What is striking about Christie's view is that that all these institutions were severely flawed, despite or because of their proselytising zeal.

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