

## A Caribbean Mystery 1964

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

*A Caribbean Mystery* is Christie in cruise control: an enjoyable read, a good set-up to the first murder, a lot of humour, and a feisty character – who is not, as so often in her earlier novels, a young woman, but an intellectually energetic, and physically compromised, old man. The clues and misdirections, however, are, by Christie's exacting standards, rather thin, and several different solutions are quite plausible.

Miss Marple seems, at the start of the novel, to have sex on her mind.

'Sex' as a word had not been mentioned in Miss Marple's young days; but there had been plenty of it – not talked about so much – but enjoyed far more than nowadays, or so it seemed to her. Though usually labelled Sin, she could't help feeling that that was preferable to what it seemed like nowadays – a kind of Duty.

The immediate cause of her ruminations is not any of her fellow guests at the *Golden Palm Hotel* on the fictional West Indian island of St Honoré but the modern novel she is reading, given to her by her nephew, Raymond West, in an attempt to keep her up-to-date. Christie gives us a sample paragraph from that novel in which a young man is astonished that the nineteen year old girl to whom he is talking has had no sexual experience. The paragraph ends:

He looked at her, stained old jersey, the bare feet, the dirty toe nails, the smell of rancid fat ... He wondered why he found her so maddeningly attractive.

Miss Marple wonders too:

And really! To have sex experience urged on you exactly as though it was an iron tonic! Poor young things..

She continues to think about the 'facts of rural life':

She had no urge to *talk* about them, far less to *write* about them – but she knew them. Plenty of sex, natural and unnatural ... perversion of all kinds. (Some kinds, indeed, that even the clever young men from Oxford who wrote books didn't seem to have heard about.)

These musings occur while Major Palgrave is recounting, at great length, various dull stories of his exploits. One of these stories involves a person who has twice murdered. Palgrave brings out a snapshot of this murderer and is about to show it to Miss Marple when he suddenly stops, appears to be staring fixedly over her right shoulder, says, 'Well, I'm damned ..' and stuffs the photo back into his wallet. The next morning Major Palgrave is found dead.

After two more murders, Miss Marple realises who the murderer is, and prevents a fourth death.

There are two clues to the identity of the murderer but neither is conclusive. One involves Major Palgrave's glass eye. When Palgrave was apparently staring over Miss Marple's right shoulder it was his blind glass eye doing the staring. His seeing eye was in fact looking to the left, and in that direction were the hotel owners, Tim and Molly Kendal. The clues to all this are there but it does not follow that Tim or Molly Kendall is the murderer. Major Palgrave may not have been staring at anything in particular. He may suddenly have realised something and have been inwardly absorbed – indeed in another Christie novel that is exactly what happens to one of the characters.

The second and more robust clue involves the similarities between the details of Palgrave's anecdote about a murderer and the behaviour of Tim Kendal. Palgrave's anecdote was of a conversation at his club. A medical man recounted the story of when he was called out by a man who seemed devoted to his wife. She had, apparently, tried to commit suicide by hanging, but her husband cut her down, called out the medical man who was telling the story and they saved her life. The husband told the doctor that his wife had had fits of depression. A month later the wife died from an overdose of sleeping pills. The verdict was suicide. Palgrave went on to say that this story prompted another doctor at the club to say that he was called out by the husband of a woman who had tried to drown herself. They saved her life and she recovered but a few weeks later she gassed herself. One of the doctors had a snapshot of the husband involved in his case; the other doctor recognised him as the same person as the husband in his case. Major Palgrave was given the snapshot and is about to show it to Miss Marple when he stares over her shoulder and puts the photo back in his wallet. This photo cannot be found after Palgrave's death.

If, as seems likely, the murderer of Major Palgrave is the same person as the husband in the photo then the reader can ask: which character seems most like that husband? Tim, of all the book's characters, is the husband who seems most devoted to his wife, and he also tells Miss Marple that his wife is having bad dreams. Another character, Esther Walters, says to Miss Marple that Tim's wife, Molly, has fits of depression. Most significantly, one night, Molly takes an overdose of tablets, but not enough to kill her. Tim discovers her, breathing oddly, and first wakes Esther Walters for help and then calls out the local doctor.

Taken out of the context of the novel these similarities seem to provide a very powerful clue to the plot and solution. So how does Christie provide such a clue without making the solution too obvious? The answer is, through red-herrings, through undermining this main clue, through holding back some significant information, and to a small extent through using tricks of style.

Red-herrings are plots that provide motive or means for the murder for someone who is not in fact the murderer. In this novel there are several such plots: people, for example, whose previous spouse has died and who are now remarried but who might have a reason to kill again. The story that Palgrave tells Miss Marple strongly implies that the murderer is a man. But Christie undermines this assumption. It turns out that Palgrave has told a similar story of a murderer to several of the guests of the *Golden Palm Hotel* but sometimes the story

involves a female murderer, and other details are different. So the reader becomes less certain that it is the story to Miss Marple that is the reason for his murder. In addition, after Molly's apparent overdose she seems to admit that she did in fact take the pills herself. Christie holds back on one piece of information that is germane to understanding the whole plot. If the reader believes, correctly as it turns out, that Tim is not only the husband in Major Palgrave's anecdote, but is also planning to kill his wife, Molly, there is the problem of what would be the motive for killing Molly. It is only at the end, after the denouement, that we learn that Esther, who is keen on Tim, will inherit a significant fortune and so, with Molly out of the way, Tim would be free to marry Esther and get his hands on that fortune.

Christie is adept at developing character, and using tricks of style, to nudge the reader away from identifying the murderer. Tim is drawn as a sympathetic character, the epitome of the caring, kind husband. After Molly's overdose, Dr Graham sits down with Tim and says: 'I want to talk to you seriously ... about your wife.' 'Poor Tim' we are told 'was torn between his hotel commitments and his wife's condition.' 'Poor Tim', the reader feels, is such an amiable youth.

There is a further clue that could lead a reader to identify Tim or Molly as the villain even before Major Palgrave's murder. This is what might be called an *external clue* because it is not available to any of the characters and is external to the novel's plot. It is not intended as a clue by the author. Miss Marple had suffered pneumonia in the winter before the novel opens, and her kind, if rather overbearing, nephew, Raymond West, suggests she take a holiday in the West Indies. Miss Marple is not keen because of the difficulties of travel and finding a suitable place to stay. Raymond sorts all this out for her and arranges for her to stay in a hotel that he knows well – the *Golden Palm Hotel* which was run by the Sandersons: 'Nicest couple in the world. They'd see she was all right. He'd write to them straight away.' But it turns out that the Sandersons have returned to England and that the hotel is now run by the Kendals, whom Raymond does not know although they seemed friendly when he communicated with them. Why would Christie remove the Sandersons, known to Raymond, from the story and replace them? Why should the hotel not still be run by the Sandersons? It seems irrelevant from the author's point of view to add unnecessary characters – unnecessary that is unless at least one of the Kendals is to be a villain.

One of the most common 'external' clues, one of the ways in which avid readers of Christie might sometimes identify the murderer, is that, apart from the main detective, the murderer is often the major character in the novel – the character who most interests the author, and the reader. This is not the case in *A Caribbean Mystery*. It is not Tim Kendal but the rich elderly invalid, Mr Rafiel, who has the most vitality and who is an intellectual match for Miss Marple herself. Christie clearly liked him since he appears again in her novel *Nemesis* published in 1971.

There is one novel, *The Pale Horse*, in which the worlds of Marple and of Poirot touch. Both Ariadne Oliver, a friend of Poirot, and Maud Dane Calthrop, a friend of Miss Marple, appear in that novel. In *A Caribbean Mystery* we have only the world of Miss Marple, and yet Mr Rafiel is somewhat like Poirot: Poirot as we meet him near the end of his life. Alternatively we might see him as a development of Mr Venables from *The Pale Horse*. In chapter 17 Marple and Rafiel discuss the murders as though they are detective colleagues. And then

Marple, teasingly, suggests that Mr Rafiel himself might have committed the murders. Rafiel points out that he is too incapacitated to have done so, but Marple argues that he could have overcome his incapacity through using his intelligence. '.. you have the brains' she tells him. He replies, as Poirot might have done: 'Of course I've got brains .. A good deal more than anybody else in this community, I'd say'. He goes on to ask: 'And anyway who the devil should I want to murder?' to which Marple replies: 'That would be a very interesting question, ... I have not yet had the pleasure of sufficient conversation with you to evolve a theory as to that.' Rafiel smiles and says: 'Conversations with you might be dangerous.' Marple responds: 'Conversations are always dangerous, if you have something to hide.'

Miss Marple, on holiday in the sun, seems more relaxed than when she is at home and this gives us a chance to get to know her better. We learn that she once worked for Armenian relief; and that she is reading that rather stoical fifteenth century divine, Thomas à Kempis. Her own stoicism is also evident. She dislikes the music of the steel band that plays in the hotel – she considers that they make a 'hideous noise, unnecessarily loud'. She would have preferred *The Blue Danube*. But, 'in the true spirit of her youth' she 'decided that as they had to be, she must manage somehow to learn to like them'. This is sensible but when, referring to the murder of poor Major Palgrave, she says, curtly: 'But that's all over – we needn't worry about it. It's the *future*. It's now,' her stoicism might sound overly callous. This is not the first novel in which Miss Marple can come across as too tough – as insensitive to deaths in the past, as setting aside the emotions, and focussing excessively on the practical. It should be remembered, however, that Miss Marple, like her author, is of the generation that in young adulthood experienced the First World War with the consequent enormous loss of life, and then, twenty years later, saw their children facing death in the Second World War. As Thomas à Kempis wrote: *how fast the glory of this world passes away*.

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