

**Sleeping Murder**  
**1976**  
**Written in 1940s or early 1950s**

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

Miss Marple's last case written in the 1940s (or early 1950s – see Trivia) and kept on hold until after Christie had stopped writing. It was finally published in 1976, ten months after Christie died.

Miss Marple herself is still alive at the end of the novel. Only once do we have the impression that she is ill.

'Miss Marple,' said Gwenda. 'You don't look well. Is there anything –'  
'It's nothing, my dear.' The old lady paused for a moment before saying  
with a strange kind of insistence, 'You know, I don't like that bit about  
the tennis net. ...'

And this is the only hint. Perhaps Miss Marple lives on for many years her role in the solving of further crimes remaining unrecorded.

Miss Marple's presence in this novel feels rather arbitrary. Indeed it was not until quite late in the planning that Christie decided whether the detective would be Miss Marple, Poirot, or Tommy and Tuppence (see Trivia). It could, quite easily, have featured none of these detectives. The central characters are Gwenda and Giles Reed, a young newly married couple, she lively and intelligent, he a little dull. Sound familiar? Very like the young Tommy and Tuppence, in fact, or the central characters in, say, *Why didn't they ask Evans*, or *The Sittaford Mystery*, or the adventure stories from the 1920s. Near the end of the book Gwenda's life is in danger but this feature, typical of Christie's adventure stories, is almost vestigial: the danger is over in less than a page as Miss Marple, more courageous and more effective than Poirot, saves her life by squirting greenfly poison into the murderer's eyes.

The best thing about the novel is the beginning. Gwenda Reed, three months married and aged 21 years sails from New Zealand, where she has been brought up, to England, ahead of her husband, Giles, to find a house for the two of them to live in on the South Coast. She finds, and buys, a house that feels like home and she seems intuitively to know details of the house and garden from the past: the exact position of a door that has been plastered over and of garden steps now buried; the design of an earlier wall-paper. And when she starts to walk down the stairs a wave of terror passes over her. A few days later she goes to the theatre in London to see John Gielgud in Webster's 17<sup>th</sup> Century play *The Duchess of Malfi*. At the words: 'Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young' the terror she had felt crystallises into a memory of seeing a woman lying dead in the hall of the house at the bottom of the stairs and of hearing exactly those words spoken by a man with 'monkey's paws'. The plot of *Sleeping Murder*, it turns out, is inspired by Webster's play, just as the plot of Poirot's last case, *Curtain*, is inspired by Shakespeare's *Othello*.

Having carefully and skilfully set up the puzzle and established an almost eerie atmosphere, Christie seems to shift into autopilot. The rest of the novel is perfectly competent – even on autopilot Christie is a consummate professional – and there is one beautifully crafted misdirection, but most of the novel is, for her, rather pedestrian. This is mainly because of the desultory way in which she populates the novel with possible suspects. It is as though she had worked out the central plot in detail – the house, the emerging childhood memories, the murderer and his relationship to the victim, the second murder – but left the sub-plots, the red herrings, the creation of alternative solutions, to the end and then almost run out of time. It feels as though the three innocent suspects are bolted on to the story rather than being integral to it. Each has a chapter in which he is the star and otherwise is almost absent from the book. All three are suspects for exactly the same reason: they are thought to have been in love with the victim but rejected by her.

The one cunning piece of misdirection which is also a clue occurs in chapter 22. At the beginning of the chapter Gwenda and Giles Reed are with Dr Kennedy waiting for the arrival of Lily Kimble who had been a house-parlourmaid to the victim eighteen years ago and who remembers something that may help identify the murderer. There is then a chapter break followed by a short section in which we are with Lily Kimble as she gets off the train and a little while later is murdered. After another chapter break we are back with Gwenda, Giles and Dr Kennedy waiting for Lily Kimble to arrive – which she never does. It is as though Dr Kennedy has a perfect alibi: he is with Gwenda and Giles when Lily is murdered. But we learn a few pages later that Lily was murdered several hours earlier – before Gwenda and Giles were at Dr Kennedy's. Christie does not hide this fact – she is perfectly fair to the reader as usual – but by her positioning the account of Lily's murder in the middle of a chapter that otherwise is set a few hours later and at Dr Kennedy's house, the reader is likely to assume, subconsciously perhaps, that the murder is taking place while Gwenda and Giles are with Dr Kennedy. A skilful misdirection achieved by breaching an unwritten convention of narrative technique. It also helps to hide a very large clue: only Dr Kennedy (and Lily's husband) knows that she remembers something that could help incriminate the murderer.

In the same chapter Christie provides another major clue that she cleverly masks by presenting it as a surprising puzzle. The central plot is that 18 years before the start of the novel Gwenda, then aged three years old, her father and her step-mother, Helen, were living in the house that Gwenda and Giles have bought. One night Helen disappears. It is assumed that she has run off with a lover. Shortly after Helen's disappearance her half-brother, Dr Kennedy, received two letters from abroad that were apparently from Helen. As the novel proceeds it seems increasingly likely that Helen was murdered – indeed that it was her dead body that Gwenda remembers seeing from the stairway. If Helen was murdered then the two letters must have been forgeries. Dr Kennedy is asked whether he still has the letters. He finds one of them, and this letter is examined by a hand-writing expert together with a known sample of Helen's handwriting supplied by Dr Kennedy. It is expected that the letter will prove a forgery but the expert says that the letter and the sample were certainly

written by the same hand. So has the whole assumption of the novel been wrong – was Helen alive and did she really go abroad? Was the body that Gwenda remembers seeing not Helen's, or was the 'body' alive, or was the apparent memory a false memory? These questions that attentive readers might well be asking themselves are in fact misdirections. Christie is trying to lead the reader down a fruitless cul-de-sac. For the reader, however, who sticks to the idea that Helen was indeed murdered, and for Miss Marple, the handwriting expert provides the key clue that takes us straight to the murderer. If Helen never went abroad and never wrote the letters then Dr Kennedy must have written both the forged letter and the sample handwriting.

How many ways are there to solve a Christie whodunnit? By correctly interpreting the clues, of course. A friend of mine said: "It's always the doctor". Not in fact the case but true more often than it should be. And it works for *Sleeping Murder*. There is a third way that makes use of what, I suspect, is the method that Christie, and probably most whodunnit writers use, in plotting a novel. A great deal of care and pre-planning go into working out the central plot – the how, the who and the why of the murder or murders. The murderer – his or her character, behaviour, movements and relationship with the detective – is part of this well-planned main story. Only when the central plot has been worked out in detail is the issue of other characters tackled, including especially the characters who are to be the possible suspects, the focus for the red herrings, the sub-plot players. In the best novels these characters are part of the main plot. In *Sleeping Murder* they are not and so this novel lays bare the mechanism that Christie uses to create her novels. One can see, as it were, the pencil sketches left on the canvas. And this leads us to the third way of solving an Agatha Christie: forget the clues and simply ask yourself who, of the possible suspects, is the main character – the character who keeps appearing, who is present more often than the others? Setting aside Miss Marple (the main detective) and Gwenda and Giles who are far too young to be suspects (although Christie is always capable of fooling us) there is one character who is persistently present, and that character is the murderer.

Let sleeping murders lie. The 'sleeping murder' was committed 18 years ago. Until now no murder has been suspected. When Gwenda wants to investigate the possibility of murder Miss Marple advises her to leave well alone. Poirot would probably have given her different advice. He often states that he does not like murderers to go unpunished. He makes exceptions but his morality seems to be based on principles and in particular a principle of retributive justice. Poirot would have been keen for the possible murder to be investigated. For him the priority would be to bring a murderer to justice. Indeed, in *Five Little Pigs*, Carla asks him to investigate the murder of her father, sixteen years earlier. Poirot does not hesitate before taking on the commission. He does warn Carla that his investigation may discover that her mother was indeed the murderer. But that is all.

Miss Marple gives more moral weight to foreseeable consequences. She is prepared to contemplate the possible outcomes and to view principles as flexible – to be

adapted in the light of where they might lead. When Gwenda and Giles are wanting to investigate the 'sleeping murder' Miss Marple says:

But it might do a great deal of harm. I would advise you both – oh yes, I really would advise it very strongly – to leave the whole thing alone ... Murder ... really isn't a thing to tamper with light-heartedly .... There are times when it is one's *duty* – an innocent person arrested ... a dangerous criminal at large who may strike again ... But this murder is very much in the past ... are you really sure, that you are wise to dig it all up again?

For Miss Marple it is not simply a question of bringing a murderer to justice. If the murderer is not likely to strike again then tracking him down may lead to more harm than letting things be. And so it proves. The murderer is identified (and presumably brought to justice) but as a direct result of investigating the murder one further person – Lily Kimble - is killed, another very nearly dies, and two more have a lucky escape. One would have to rate the moral value of bringing a murderer to justice very highly to consider it worth the death of Lily Kimble. Or, of course, rate Lily's death very low. And this is what those involved seem to do. There is an extraordinary callousness in the way in which Gwenda and Giles, and even Miss Marple, respond to the news of Lily's death. There is no hint of concern that had they 'left the whole thing alone' Lily would not have died. Even Lily's husband appears to consider her death as a mildly unfortunate result of her not having followed his advice. And one senses Christie's contempt for Lily when she writes of her: 'Eager, greedy, shortsighted, she went on dreaming ...'

If the elderly Miss Marple is to die shortly after she solves *Sleeping Murder* we can be sure that there will be many people at her funeral: most of the inhabitants of St Mary Mead, senior police officers, her nephew and his family, and possibly some of those who have valued her detective work. Poor Lily Kimble by contrast it seems goes to her untimely death mourned by no one.

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