

## Nemesis

1971

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

*Nemesis* is the last Miss Marple novel that Agatha Christie wrote. *Sleeping Murder* was Marple's last case and was published in 1976 after Christie's death, but it was written almost thirty years earlier.

In these final novels, with Christie now over 75 years old, the plots, the clues and the misdirections show little of that painstaking precision and ingenious integrity that characterise so many of her earlier books. The plot holes are larger and more numerous, the key events less believable, and the detectives' reasoning less logical. All these weaknesses are manifest in *Nemesis* and yet it is still a good read. Christie's well-honed skills in telling a story carry the reader comfortably along, like sitting in a first-class railway carriage even when the view from the window is not especially interesting.

There is no previous novel of Christie's quite like *Nemesis*. Late in her writing career she has alighted on a promising sub-genre of the whodunnit – a whodunnit in which the puzzle to be investigated is only revealed slowly, bit by bit. A whodunnit in which much of the narrative drive, as in a thriller, is discovering the next step in understanding what it is all about. In *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), Mrs Ariadne Oliver, that alter-ego of Christie herself, lays a murder hunt as a game at a summer fête. The game turns sour when a real murder takes place. In *Nemesis* it is Mr Rafiel who has laid the murder hunt, and it is Miss Marple who is set the challenge to follow it to find the truth about a murder that took place some years earlier. This sub-genre of crime novel that Christie is exploring in *Nemesis* might therefore be called *the murder-hunt-whodunnit*.

Mr Rafiel is perhaps the last interesting character that Christie created. Miss Marple met him when she was on holiday on the fictional island of St Honoré in the Caribbean. The story of their meeting is told in *A Caribbean Mystery*. In that novel Mr Rafiel and Miss Marple join forces, Mr Rafiel playing the part of a highly intelligent Dr Watson to Miss Marple's Sherlock Holmes. Mr Rafiel has since died but he had arranged for Miss Marple to be contacted by his solicitor, Mr Broadribb, and invited to 'investigate a certain crime'. No more details of what the crime is or how she should go about investigating it are given in this initial communication, but there is treasure at the end of the hunt. Mr Rafiel wrote: 'I have ordered a certain sum to be placed so that if you accept this request and as a result of your investigation this crime is properly elucidated, the money will become yours absolutely'. Mr Broadribb informs Miss Marple that that sum is £20,000.

Miss Marple accepts the challenge, and further communications and instructions are passed on to her from beyond the grave through Mr Broadribb. The hunt begins when Miss Marple is sent on a tour, by coach, of the famous houses and gardens of Great Britain. First stop: Blenheim Palace.

At this stage neither Miss Marple nor the reader knows which murder is being investigated. Miss Marple talks to her fellow passengers, observing them carefully. When the coach tour

stops for a couple of nights' sojourn in one place Miss Marple is met by a Mrs Lavinia Glynn and invited to stay at the house she shares with her two sisters: Miss Clotilde, and Miss Anthea, Bradbury-Scott. Gradually it becomes clear that the relevant murder is that of Verity Hunt, a young woman killed around ten years ago shortly before she was due to marry Mr Rafiel's son, Michael. Michael is now serving a life-sentence for her murder. The key question is: was this a miscarriage of justice?

One of the problems with the novel is that the whole set-up is beyond belief. Mr Rafiel may never have loved his son but he did use his enormous wealth to make sure that his son had good lawyers to defend him. When we learn of the real solution it is almost inconceivable that Michael Rafiel, with a decent legal team to defend him, would have been found guilty 'beyond reasonable doubt'. And why has Mr Rafiel waited all these years before engaging Miss Marple to re-examine the evidence? Why did he not, around the time when his son was arrested, employ not only a good legal team but also a private detective (Poirot for example)? Even if we suppose that Mr Rafiel, as he was dying, had a change of heart towards his son, or was persuaded by Professor Wanstead to reconsider his son's guilt, why did he not give Miss Marple more information from the start? The only possible explanation is that he thought that Miss Marple would be more likely to take on the challenge if it were presented in the form of a treasure hunt than if she were simply asked to look into an old murder. But it is more likely that she would agree to use her sleuthing powers to re-examine a specific murder than accept a vague challenge. The set-up, it is true, does make for an engaging story but this is at the expense of its having even the limited degree of realism that is rightly expected of a whodunnit.

The novel's weaknesses in comparison with 'classic Christie' lie not only in the absurdities of the set-up but also in elements of the plot. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, one of Christie's early Poirot novels published in 1928, a murdered woman's face is disfigured, making identification problematic. At the denouement Poirot says: 'It began with the one point that puzzled me. ... *The disfigured face*. .. it rouses an immediate question, the question of identity. That naturally was the first thing that occurred to me. Was the dead woman really [the person identified]?' A decade or so later Christie again teases the reader with the question of whether a disfigured body is the person who it at first appears to be. In both these novels Christie is well aware that a reader will, like Poirot, question the true identity of a murdered person whose face is disfigured, and in both these novels Christie is cunning in playing with, and manipulating, the reader's expectations. But in *Nemesis* there is no such sophistication. A body is found, the face disfigured, the clothes suggest that the identity of the body is that of Verity Hunt. Another woman of similar age, Nora Broad, has gone missing and has never been found. Surely, the experienced Christie reader will think, there is some twist here, some clever use of this old detective fiction trope of a body with a disfigured face, as there was in those earlier novels. But no. All is as a naïve reader would think: the body found is that of Nora Broad (and not Verity Hunt), and the person who so confidently misidentified it turns out to be the murderer. Is Christie playing a clever game of bluff? I don't think so, and if that is what was intended it doesn't work. It seems rather that Christie no longer has the intellectual energy to devise one of those devious plots for which she is rightly admired. Even within the story it is impossible to believe that the authorities would have been so desultory as to accept that the body found was that of Verity Hunt without further investigation.

Christie must have thought that the novel would be too static if all the relevant murders were in the past and so one of Miss Marple's fellow passengers, Elizabeth Temple, is killed. Her death is caused by a boulder being dislodged so that it falls on her as she is walking along a country path. She dies in hospital from the injuries sustained. The reader, however, never understands what Elizabeth Temple herself knows nor why the murderer believes she is a threat. We learn the following information about her. She has been headmistress of a famous girls' school, *Fallowfield*, but is now retired. She had known Verity Hunt when Verity had been a pupil at her school. She did not know Mr Rafiel personally, though knew of him, and knew that Verity had been engaged to Mr Rafiel's son. Mr Rafiel did not send her on this tour. It is not clear whether Mr Rafiel booked Miss Marple onto this particular tour because he knew that Elizabeth Temple would be on it. If not it would seem to be an extraordinary coincidence since both Miss Temple and Miss Marple are involved in the same case. If Mr Rafiel however did book Miss Marple on this tour in order for her to meet Miss Temple one wonders how he knew that Miss Temple would be on it. Setting that aside, Elizabeth Temple is on this tour because it stops at a town called Fillminster where a certain Archdeacon Brabazon lives. Archdeacon Brabazon had been going to marry Michael Rafiel to Verity Hunt, but Verity was killed shortly before the wedding had been due to take place. It is unclear what information Elizabeth Temple wants from Archdeacon Brabazon. And now we come to the crux of the problem for the reader. Does Elizabeth Temple know, or strongly suspect, that Clotilde killed Verity? If she does not know, then why is she murdered? She tells Miss Marple that Verity died of love. It turns out that, in a sense, Clotilde did kill Verity because of love. Is this evidence that Miss Temple did know, or strongly suspected, the truth? If so, why does she not tell Miss Marple, either when the two of them first have a tête-à-tête, or when Miss Marple visits Miss Temple in hospital? In any case, what possible evidence does Miss Temple have for her suspicions?

More problematic, however, is how does Clotilde know that Elizabeth Temple suspects her of murder? How does Clotilde even know that Miss Temple is on this tour and will be walking along the path where she is murdered? The only possible explanation is that Elizabeth Temple had already contacted Clotilde and accused her, and told her that she would be visiting the neighbourhood where Clotilde lives. In that case, however, there would be no point in Miss Temple's planning to visit Archdeacon Brabazon. And, in any case, on her deathbed Miss Temple says to Miss Marple: 'Which of them? .. One of them, but which? Find out.' It seems likely that Elizabeth Temple meant which of the three sisters murdered Verity. But whether or not that is what she meant it is clear that she is still too uncertain of who killed Verity to have made an accusation that would have sealed her death.

The various weaknesses in the plot – and there are others – have a knock-on effect on Miss Marple's method of solving the murder. Since reason cannot bridge the plot holes, 'intuition' has to come to the rescue. Near the end of the book, Miss Marple summarises how she came to the truth: 'It *was* feeling ... it wasn't really ... logical deduction. It was based on a kind of emotional reaction or susceptibility to – well, I can only call it atmosphere.' An honest appraisal, but not very satisfactory in a *whodunnit*.

The character of Miss Marple, over the novels, varies somewhat. She can be unforgiving and harsh. She can be amusing and kind. This variation, whilst not impossible, is perhaps a reason why no actor has quite captured her complexity. In *Nemesis* we mostly see Miss Marple in forbidding mode. The Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard describes her: 'So gentle – and so ruthless.' The Home Secretary says: 'The most frightening woman I ever met.' But right at the end we see a more playful, spontaneous, Miss Marple. Mr Broadribb, is arranging for her to receive her 'treasure' at the end of the successful hunt: £20,000. He offers to put Miss Marple in touch with someone who can advise on investing the money. 'Oh, I don't want to invest any of it.' Mr Broadribb then asks whether he should pay the money into her deposit account. 'Certainly not. Put it in my current account.' Mr Broadribb, still concerned, says: 'You could ask your bank manager's advice ... one never knows when one wants something for a rainy day.' 'The only thing I shall want for a rainy day' Miss Marple replies, 'will be my umbrella. ... I am going to spend [the money] .. I'm going to have some fun with it.' And, for a moment, Mr Schuster sees Miss Marple as a little girl: 'young, happy, going to enjoy herself.'

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