

3.16 Read With Me: Agatha Christie

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that this work was developed and is presented on the unceded territory of the Lenape People. I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[fade in: theme music with violins, clarinet, and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library: a podcast and book club for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[fade out: theme music]

Angourie [host]

October is upon us, dear friends, and you know what that means? It means it's the spooky season. Now, Halloween is not really a big thing in Australia, but I'm not in Australia at the moment. I am in the land of pumpkin spice lattes and inflatable Halloween decorations on front porches. That's right, my friends, the level of dedication to Halloween decorations in America never ceases to amaze me. And so this month, I thought I'd try and participate by delivering some Halloween-ish content for you in the lead up to the 31st. So, I'm not a big thriller or horror reader, mostly because I don't deal with violence and gore very well. But my niche of the mystery thriller genre is Agatha Christie. I love a good Agatha Christie. So over the past few weeks, I decided to read three Agatha Christie mysteries, and I took you along with me.

But before we go back in time to mid-September, when I started this journey, I want to tell you a little bit more about my love of Agatha Christie. Now it began when I was just a small child, only ten years old, and I watched the 1978 adaptation of *Death on the Nile*, and the 1982 adaptation of *Evil Under the Sun*, both of these starred Peter Ustinov as Hercule Poirot. And I really loved the excitement of these stories and just the intrigue of the mysteries, and so after watching those movies, my dad found me a second-hand copy of *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, which is a lesser-known Christie mystery. And I read the first few chapters when I was ten, and I got so terrified I had to stop reading. It was somehow just much, much, scarier to read about murder in a book than to watch a bright, colourful 1970s film adaptation. So after that traumatic experience, I abandoned Christie for a while. I watched a few film adaptations of her books here and there but never again picking up one of her actual novels. That was until late 2018, when I decided to get over my childhood fear and read *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which I had read was one of her best. And I was still creeped out by the murder, but this time I was a big girl and it didn't faze me quite as much. And that one was brilliant, and it's still my favourite Christie mystery to this day. So after that, I rekindled my love of her works, and I've read quite a few since then.

But when choosing which Christies to read for this challenge, I of course took to the internet to find out the best Christie mysteries out there. I had read quite a few of the ones that topped the lists, so this includes *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Death on the Nile*, *And Then There Were None*. And I had seen the movie adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*, so I felt I didn't need to read that

one. But I collected a handful of ones that interested me, and I began with a classic Poirot: *Peril at End House*, published in 1932. About *Peril at End House*, bookriot.com says, “Poirot uses some unusual theatrics. Hastings narrates, which is always a bonus.” So for those of you who are Agatha Christie newbies, Poirot is one of her most famous recurring characters. He is a flamboyant Belgian detective who is determined to retire, but always gets roped into solving murders one way or another. Hastings is his friend, who often narrates the story from first person perspective. And Hastings helps Poirot figure things out, but is always one step behind. Thus, so is the reader. So let me take you with me, back in time to mid-September, when I began reading *Peril at End House*.

[fade in and out: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

Well, this is very exciting already. We’re following Hercule Poirot, told through the eyes of his loyal friend Hastings. And we begin with them having a hearty old chat about how Poirot is definitely retired this time, but wait! There is a mystery! And therefore Poirot must solve it. I don’t want to give too much away, because I always like going into mysteries knowing basically nothing, but I will tell you that this one is set in a little town on the south coast of England, and it’s very intriguing so far and I will update you once I have a suspect.

[fade in: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

Peril at End House didn’t begin with a death, and without a death, you cannot have a suspect. So at this point I had no theories. But I was surprised to discover a few remarkable things about this book worth mentioning. The first being that there were two Australian characters, and I was very intrigued to see Agatha Christie’s representation of Aussies.

[fade out: piano music]

Oh my god, this is hilarious. So, there are two Australian characters, right? And I’ve just written down a bunch of quotes from, like, her paragraph about describing the Australians. She says one of them had, quote: “a rather loud, bullying voice.” End quote. And they say things like, “neighbours should be matey, don’t you think?” And, “now you tell me you’re a bonza detective”, and “have a cup of morning tea, Australian fashion.” Like ... like what? It’s so bizarre, I love it. And Poirot says, of the Australians, quote: “So simple and unassuming. Typical Australians.” Which – oh, I just find so funny. Very – very amusing, I did not expect this going in.

[fade in: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

By page 100, a death had finally occurred, and I began theorising whodunnit and how.

[fade out: piano music]

Okay, I have a theory. Well, two theories, actually, that coincide with one other. And the first theory is about how it was done, and the second theory is who did it. And I’m trying to not give anything away! But I reckon both my theories are a little far-fetched. I almost never guess the right person. It only happened once, in a Miss Marple, and even then I wasn’t too sure. But I’ll – I’ll stick with my theory, I’ll stick to it.

[fade in: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

As I read on, I greatly delighted in Poirot's list of suspects, with all his notes on means and motivation. And I also remembered that Christie loves a good meta moment, as so I.

[fade out: piano music]

I just – I love how she casually references detective novels. So for example, here Hercule Poirot's talking to his friend Hastings about the suspects, and he says, quote: "You have a tendency, Hastings, to prefer the least likely. That, no doubt, is from reading too many detective stories. In real life, nine times out of ten, it is the most likely and the most obvious person who commits the crime." End quote. And I just love all the, like, tongue-in-cheek commentary about how "this stuff only happens in books" and mystery novel tropes, and yeah, I just – I love that.

[fade in: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

By page 125, I had begun to doubt my theory. Either I was wrong, or my chief suspect was a brilliant liar. And at this point, Poirot was just as stumped as I was.

[fade out: piano music]

Something I find absolutely hilarious about every Poirot is that the companion, you know, whether that's Hastings or someone else, always questions whether Poirot will solve it. Like, there's always a point towards the end where Poirot hits a wall and Hastings is like, "He's not what he used to be. You know, he's getting old, maybe he's lost it, and this will be the one murder he never solves."

[fade in: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

Of course, this moment never lasts very long.

[fade out: piano music]

This is it! This is it! This is the moment where Poirot has figured it all out! But of course, you know, we're not allowed to know what he's figured out yet. Poirot has dramatic flair, and we must wait for the grand finale. And of course he's going to stage a big reveal with all the suspects, but I'm looking forward to it. Final guesses, anyone? I'm sticking to my first theories of how it was done and who did it. But, knowing Christie, I'm probably wrong.

[fade in: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

And? Did I guess correctly?

[fade out: piano music]

I can't believe it! I actually got it right! I am so, so proud of myself. I, like, just read the page where they revealed who it was, and ... Oh my god, this is the first time I actually guessed the murderer, like, right from the beginning. And I was just – I was convinced that it was too ridiculous, or too unexpected. But that was my fatal flaw, my friends. I forgot at how much Agatha Christie likes drama, and flair, and very unexpected, if not improbable, endings. So, well done to me.

[fade in and out: ominous music with cello, violin, and piano]

What a wild ride that was. I was so certain Ms. Christie would once again prove me wrong with her wily tricks, but for the first time, I was one step ahead of the razor sharp Hercule Poirot. And you know what, I wasn't even disappointed that I guessed it correctly, and it didn't affect my rating in any way. In fact, I gave it 5 stars because I thought it was such a great mystery with a fantastic twist. Poirot was as charming as ever, and Hastings was a great narrator along the way. I loved the setting on the coast, and the cast of young, glamorous characters. And Ms. Christie once again managed to subvert the tropes she created, and still surprised me with twists and turns, even if I correctly guessed the culprit. If you like an isolated coastal setting, young people in love, and the tension of waiting for something to happen, then this one is for you. Five stars for *Peril at End House*.

And now for my next trick, I will correctly guess the murderer of the next book! ... Maybe. After the success of *Peril at End House*, I was riding on a high. I was fearless, I was invincible, and it was this inflated ego that prompted me to choose this next book. *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, published in 1940. That's right, my friends, I went back to finish what I started. *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* is another Poirot mystery, but is told in third person perspective, and Hastings isn't there to narrate for us. I went into it not knowing anything, all I had to hold onto was a vague memory of a murder at the dentist's office. So, what did Ms. Christie have in store for me this time? Did I guess the murderer correctly? Let's find out.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

Yes, a murder has happened. No, I do not have any chief suspects yet. It's slightly trickier with one like this, because it's not an isolated location with a set list of suspects. So it's a bit tricky to keep track of who's who and where they were and when and what their relationship to the murder victim is. But I guess I should take a punt before I read much further ... or shall I say rather a stab in the dark? I'm guessing it's [bleep sound effect], but I don't know how they did it, if at all.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe was deemed as one of Christie's more political novels. Written at the beginning of the second World War, she talks a lot about ethics and justice. And Poirot's concern with justice was a theme that cropped up in *Peril at End House*, too, but *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* treated this subject with a lot more gravity and solemnity. And this was something I noticed as I read further.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

Poirot is very interested and earnest in seeing justice done, and I really love that, you know, because for all his dramatic flair and theatricality in revealing the murderer, he sincerely cares about the victims. He's never paid for his work – at least, it's never mentioned – and, you know, even though the general idea is that he gets roped into these murder mysteries and solving them because he's, like, so curious, it's also because he can't bear to live with the threat of more innocent lives being lost. And in *Peril at End House*, this came up too, you know, he took it as a personal failure that the victim had been murdered. And now, in this one, the part that I just read, he gravely reprimands one of the suspects for not caring about the victim, even though Poirot doesn't have a personal connection to the victim either. And I think this is what possibly makes him such a great hero for these stories. Because even though, you know, they're very plot-driven, and in every one the characters are stereotypes and caricatures, Poirot remains both camp enough for the genre, and sympathetic enough so the reader trusts he will see justice done.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

Reading a second Poirot so quickly after the first made me notice some more of the narrative devices and character traits that made this series of books so successful – not only in a commercial sense, but in the sense of telling a believable and engaging story. I started to notice how carefully Christie balances the sadder and graver moments that talk about death and grief, with some of the lighter moments in Poirot's flamboyance and theatricality.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

So, we have gotten to the point at which everything has fallen into place for Monsieur Poirot ... but I have absolutely no clue what's going on.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

At this point I wasn't enjoying this one as much, because I had no chief suspects. The story is set in and around London, rather than in one isolated location like End House, and I discovered that I didn't like it as much. With an isolated setting, like a ship, or an island, or a house on the cliff, you have a definitive list of suspects. They all have motivation, they all have the means, it's just about figuring out who's lying. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, there were so many moving parts I couldn't keep track of who was who and where and when. I found myself wondering, not for the last time, what on earth Agatha had cooked up for me this time.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

Well, well, well, you've done it again, Ms. Christie. I was completely fooled.

[short sound bite: ominous and fast-paced string orchestra music with violins and cello]

Of course my suspicions were incorrect – I mean, I had no real basis for them, I was just pulling a name off the top of my head. *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* was an interesting one, because it was quite different from other Christies I've read. As I mentioned before, it tackled bigger ideas of politics and ethics, and felt more like a character drama than a flamboyant mystery. Originally, this was a criticism of mine. I really like how other Christie mysteries seem to happen in an isolated

vacuum, with silly grudges and white lies getting out of hand and resulting in murder. And mostly, our characters are just your average Joes. You might have a rich Countess or a powerful politician, but these characters ultimately lose their power when they're taken away from their subordinates and isolated in a place like a ship or a train or an island. And they also lose their power in this isolated setting because Poirot scrutinises them just as much as everyone else. But the difference with this novel is that it takes a look at political figures in a much more public setting – where these people have more power and influence over Poirot's case. And so despite the catchy title and Poirot's signature quips, this story is a lot darker in tone, and brings in bigger ideas like morality, politics and power. And of course, all of this frames a very complicated and convoluted and completely unexpected murder mystery. I think what I liked about this one is that it circles back to what I was talking about before in terms of Poirot really caring about the value of someone's life. The incorporation of this discussion on morality and humanity was initially a criticism of mine, but knowing the political context of the time, I think it really works. I just wish that the murder plotline had been simpler in order to balance out the added elements of political messages. And I guess the big question is: did it scare me as much as it did ten years ago? No, it did not. I was not scared in the slightest. I don't know why I was such a chicken when I was a kid. I mean, I still kind of am a chicken. But even, like, in terms of Christie, who does not write gory stuff at all, this was so tame. If you're in the mood for something a little more thoughtful and little less flamboyant, then this is for you. 4 stars for *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*.

So at this point, I've guessed one correctly, and one incorrectly, which means it all comes down to the final book. For my last choice, I decided on *Endless Night*, published in 1967. This is a standalone novel, meaning it is not part of Christie's Poirot, Marple, or any other detective series. BookRiot.com says, "this is a book that breaks most of her rules", and well-known Agatha Christie critic Robert Barnard calls it, "the best of the late Christies." According to agathachristie.com, it is also one of her personal favourites. She wrote it when she was 76. I went into it knowing absolutely nothing, and ready to be blown away.

[fade in and out: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

So I just started *Endless Night*, and ... it's different. It's really different. I can already tell that this isn't going to be like her other murder mysteries. To begin with, it's not really clear when – or even if – someone is going to be murdered. The story is told in first person, from a man named ... Michael or something, I don't really remember. And it's all told in hindsight, with some pretty heavy foreshadowing at the end of each chapter that something really bad is going to happen. And it all begins with Michael's interest in buying a rundown house named Tower House on an isolated plot of land that is said to be cursed. And the style of this one is so much more ... grounded. You know, something I love about the early Poirots is that they're so flamboyant and theatrical, almost camp. But this novel is very ominous and mysterious in its reality. You know, there are still a few caricatures. There's a Romani woman named Mrs. Lee, who reads Michael's palm and warns him to run as far away from this place as possible. It's a pretty lazy stereotype to fall back on, and also the land itself that the house is on is said to be cursed by the Romani people. So I – I wonder how that story is going to play out with her.

[fade in and out: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

In terms of tone and style, *Endless Night* immediately felt like a more mature book, and I think it made a difference knowing how late in her career this was written. It is set in a very nondescript time period, but there were still themes of hurtling forward into new technologies, ideas, and politics, while some things – like Tower House – were still stuck in the past. And the thing that immediately struck me about this novel was how much less conservative it was. Our young male protagonist talks openly about sex, drugs, and – well, not so much rock and roll, but – relationships with women and outdated societal expectations. Christie was certainly breaking all her rules, even the most important rule of them all ...

[fade in: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

No one's been murdered yet. [laughs] I'm still waiting.

[ominous orchestral music stops and elevator waiting music plays]

Alright, so someone has finally died. And I did kind of see it coming. It wasn't really a surprise. But we're now basically two thirds of the way through the book, you know, maybe even more. So I'm very intrigued to see how this plays out, and how Christie manages to subvert her own genre yet again. But there are a few things I want to remark on and address at this point, and the first is that the thing with Mrs. Lee, the Romani woman who read Michael's palm, has become a really big plot point. Off-page, she told a character to get off her people's land, telling them that they had built a house on stolen land and they would pay for it with this "curse". And this curse is causing harm to our protagonist Michael and his wife, Ellie, who both think Mrs. Lee is a nuisance and is a bit crazed and dangerous. You know, at this point in the story, I'm not sure if Christie wants us to sympathise with Mrs. Lee or with Michael and his wife. You know, I think my instinct is to sympathise with Mrs. Lee, but I think, yeah, it definitely depends on how this story-line plays out and how it all comes to an end.

[fade in and out: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

In the novel, the word gipsy is used to describe Mrs. Lee, but I've chosen to not use that word because I've read that it's a harmful and derogatory word to describe the Romani people. The stereotype of Mrs. Lee got me thinking about Orientalism. This is a concept that refers to how Western media depicts Middle Eastern, Asian and North African cultures. Orientalism as a concept was first described and articulated by Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism*. In his book, he talks about how the West, and thereby Western media, views the Orient as something that is static and underdeveloped. This concept is something I've just started learning more about, so I'd like to direct you to two other sources that have helped me understand more about this analysis. The first is a podcast episode from the podcast *Witch, Please*. In this episode, the hosts do a deep dive into this concept of Orientalism, and then apply it to a reading of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. I really loved listening to this episode, they talk about the origins of the theory and how one can apply it to texts. The second source I want to direct you to is a YouTube video essay on Orientalism in Wes Anderson films. Again, this talks about the origins of the theory and how it can be applied to something like a film. So I'll have both of these things linked in the show notes for you to look at if you choose and if you're interested. But, back to *Endless Night*. I had another thing that I wanted to remark upon ...

[fade in and out: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

Could this book possibly be read as queer? Michael's wife, Ellie, has a very close female companion who's been with her for three years, and her name is Greta. And everyone says that Greta is, you know, really domineering and has too much control over Ellie, but it's clear that Ellie just, like, loves having her around. And Michael is suspicious, you know even jealous of their relationship. Also, Michael feels very threatened and emasculated by the fact that he's completely reliant on his wife for money. And he's threatened by how capable and strong Greta is. So ... coincidence? Or queer? I don't know.

[fade in: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

Could this 1967 Christie be so contemporary as to include queer undertones? Or overtones, even? Well, I had to read on to find out.

[fade in and out: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

Okay, so I just finished *Endless Night*, and ... wow. How weird. Okay, I didn't update you much before the end because I didn't have much to comment on. And then when we got to the big twist, you know, obviously I wanted to say something but I couldn't because spoilers. What I will say that I did not see this one coming, but the twist was familiar to me. And then I did a bit of research, and found out that, yes, of course, this twist uses two plot points from two of Christie's other novels, both of which I have already read. So when the twist happened, I was like, wait a second, I've read this before. So that was kind of disappointing, but you know, she still made it all slot into perfect place, as always.

[fade in and out: ominous staccato orchestral music with droning double bass, cello and violins]

Before I get into my review, I want to talk a little bit more about the historical context of this one, because I think it's quite important in understanding this novel. As I mentioned before, *Endless Night* was published in 1967, and is one of Christie's later works. Christie's last novel was published six years later, in 1973, and she died three years after that, in 1976. And this novel has *such* a different tone to her earlier works, which is very understandable. There is a 51 year time gap between 1916, which is when she wrote her first mystery, and this one. Times were changing, you know, the late 60s was a very pivotal time in world history and politics. I think what's so remarkable about this Christie is that it shows how she's adapted to the times. When we look at other media, so books and films that came out that year, we had *The Graduate* and *Valley of the Dolls* which were two successful films with cult followings, and in terms of books we had *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton. And looking at those pieces of media, *Endless Night* is very conservative in comparison. But when you compare *Endless Night* to Christie's other novels and her body of work, it's very contemporary and gritty, almost. All this is to say that I'm actually quite impressed with Christie's style, and how she was able to adapt her style to fit with the new era in which she was writing.

Speaking of style, I really loved the tone of this book. It's very understated and unsettling, completely different to the flamboyant theatrics of Poirot. It's less of a classic whodunnit and more

of a psychological thriller. Even though she recycled a few plot points that cheapened the reveal for me, it was still very clever, and of course got me thinking about all those little hints that she planted along the way. In terms of Mrs. Lee's storyline, I won't hesitate to tell you that it was a complete red herring, and the curse really had nothing to do with anything. It was just another harmful trope to signal something as "other" and "dangerous", and therefore possibly the reason behind the murder or the goings on at Tower House. It's disappointing, but also not unexpected from Christie, unfortunately. And as for my queer theory, well I'm sure this comes as no surprise to you that that was not correct. *Endless Night* may be one of Christie's more contemporary works, but not that contemporary. I do think there is a reading to be done there, though, and some textual evidence to back it up, but maybe that's for another episode. Overall, I really enjoyed the darker tone to this one. Christie still injects her cleverness, but this time with less dramatic flair and sly wit, and more eeriness and psychopathy. Psychopathy? Psych- psychopathy. You know what I mean! It's a word, I googled it. The twist was slightly cheapened for me, because of the recycled plot points, but it was still a very interesting read, and definitely a very memorable one. If you're in the mood for something more character-driven and eerie, then *Endless Night* is definitely for you. Four stars to *Endless Night*.

Well, what a journey this has been. From 1932 to 1967, from isolated houses to benign dentist offices, from overcoming a childhood fear to injecting queer theory, this has been a wild ride. And what have I learnt along the way? Well, this has just confirmed my love of Christie mysteries. And even with me reading three of them in a row, I still didn't pick up on all her wily tricks and sneaky hints. But I think I did manage to pinpoint what exactly it is that I like about them, and it's all about the balance. It's that perfect storm of glamour and gravity, it's Poirot's flamboyance and his sincerity, it's Christie giving you just enough to guess, but not enough to deduce. Agatha Christie truly is, as they say, the queen of crime.

[fade in: theme music with violins, clarinet, and twinkly triangle]

Thank you all very much for listening to this spooky episode in the lead up to Halloween! I hope you enjoyed it, I certainly had lots of fun reading these books and sharing my thoughts with you. Next week is a very special interview episode, in which I will chat to my mum about her podcast on the 1918 flu pandemic, so stay tuned for that. Until next week, I hope you're all staying safe and happy, and maybe reading a cosy murder mystery. Bye!

[fade out: theme music]