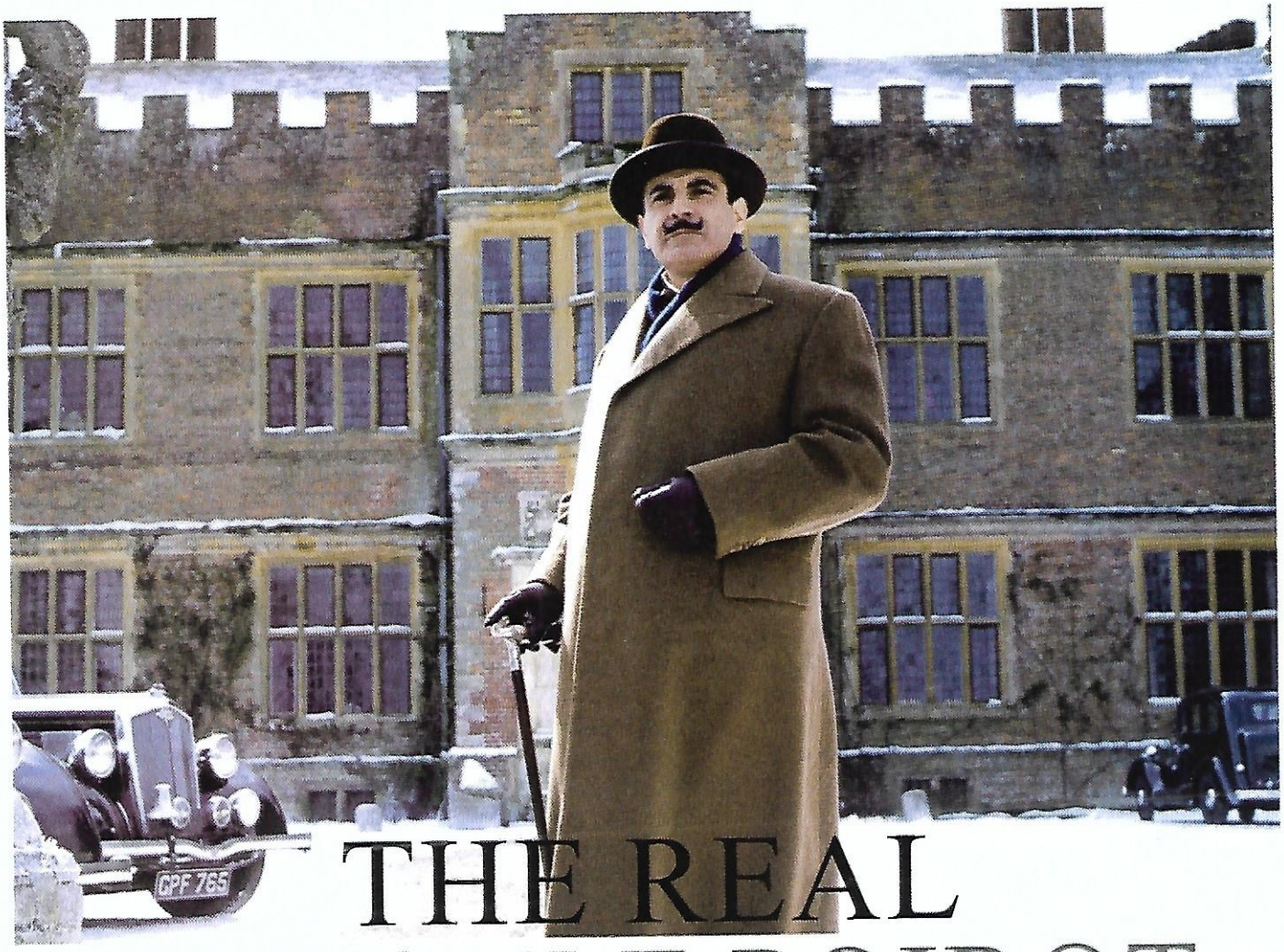


THE REAL HERCULE POIROT

On the 100th anniversary of his creation, Amanda Hodges celebrates crime fiction's most enduring character – Monsieur Hercule Poirot

"MY name is Hercule Poirot and I am probably the greatest detective in the world." So modestly declared the inimitable Belgian detective, Agatha Christie's immortal creation, in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*. A hundred years ago this year, M. Poirot first appeared in print, fully formed, as the sleuthing hero of Christie's debut novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

Christie was then a young, newly married woman experimenting with her first novel. She had been born into an affluent family in Torquay in 1890, and had most recently (after nursing duties) been working in the local hospital dispensary where she'd acquired an in-depth knowledge of poisons, which was to be an invaluable asset for a crime writer.

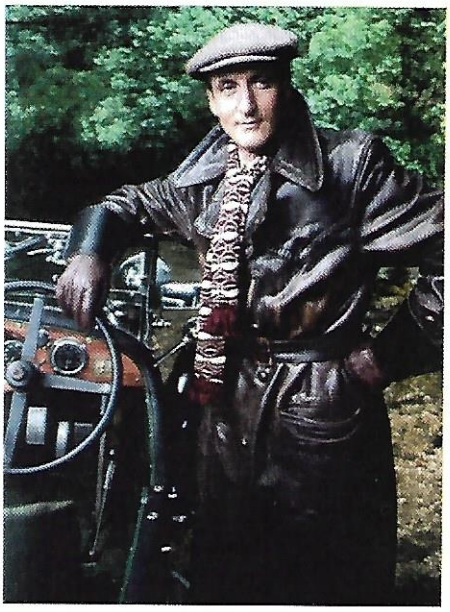
Her sister, Madge, with whom she often competed, had long been writing and had dared Christie to try composing a detective novel, knowing of her penchant for the genre. A fan of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, in her autobiography Christie very briefly described how she chose the distinctive Poirot.

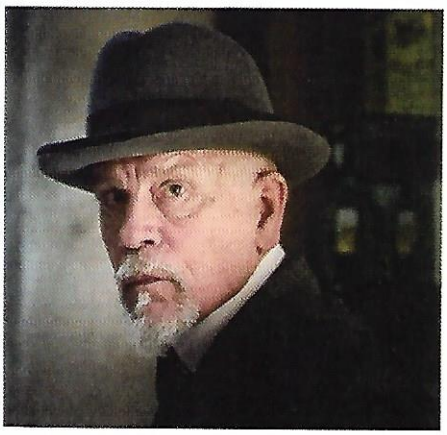
Agatha Christie, Poirot's creator

"I remembered our Belgian refugees . . . why not make my detective a Belgian . . . that was all right, settled, thank goodness." Foreign detectives were fashionable at the time, and Belgian refugees were topical given their plight during World War I.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles was written in 1916, rejected by several publishers and then sent to Bodley Head, who kept it for 18 months before giving feedback. In the intervening time, "I had quite given up hope of ever getting a book published," Christie recalled.

She married the dashing Archie and became a mother, totally forgetting about the submitted manuscript. After finally receiving feedback and >





Top: Peter Ustinov as Poirot in Death on the Nile, *1977; Middle: Hugh Fraser as Poirot's sidekick Captain Hastings in* The Adventure of Johnnie Waverly, *1989; Bottom: John Malkovitch's Poirot in 2018's* The ABC Murders

rewriting the final court scene (deemed the book's only weakness), Christie finally saw it published in 1920. Motivated by the need for extra funds rather than inspiration, she soon had other books published and slowly came to terms with burgeoning fame.

"It was by now just beginning to dawn on me that perhaps I might be a writer by profession. I was not sure yet. I still had an idea that writing books was only the natural successor to embroidering sofa cushions."

Poirot was a retired Belgian police officer turned detective, but there was nothing generic about him. He was, from the very first, a truly unique and brilliantly realised character. Hastings, his long-suffering sidekick, describes him: "He was hardly more than five feet four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side . . . the neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound."

His perfectly maintained moustache and fastidious nature have become infamous, and his reliance on painstaking, logical deduction legendary. "Order and method, and 'the little grey cells'," he proclaimed as all one needed to solve crime. "Every murderer is probably somebody's old friend," observed Poirot philosophically in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. "You cannot mix up sentiment and reason."

Impeccably groomed, courteous and eccentric, he is a figure easy to deride or spoof, and early portrayals often emphasised this comic potential rather than his essential brilliance. Charles Laughton played him on stage in 1928 in *Alibi*. Then, a few years later, Austin Trevor became the first screen Poirot, appearing in three British films, inexplicably clean-shaven as a typical Thirties sleuth.

Happily, Albert Finney's 1974 *Murder on the Orient Express* offered a more convincing Poirot, and Peter Ustinov's subsequent *Death on the Nile* also found favour. Ustinov observed the necessary detail, saying, "Poirot is so terribly accurate and tidy in his mind and habits. So meticulous." He is certainly a detective of singular methodology, exemplified by Kenneth Branagh's recent interpretation (complete with luxuriant moustache) in the film *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Poirot is guided by his knowledge of psychology and human behaviour and never allows sentiment to influence him. "I am methodical, orderly and logical, and I do not like to distort facts to support a theory," he says.

An excerpt from *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* exemplifies this dictum. Hastings casually tells Poirot that a fact he has acquired is too trivial for consideration. A groan bursts from Poirot. "What have I told you? Everything must be taken into account. If the fact will not fit the theory – let the theory go."

Laura Thompson, Christie's incisive biographer, points out that Christie's grasp of intricate plot detail and Poirot's innate perception was spot on from the first. Although he may fluctuate in mood, Poirot's essence never changes in subsequent books, and he arrives in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* a completely formed character – a triumphant achievement for a fledgling writer. "The moment in the book when Poirot's shaking hand automatically straightens a pair of candlesticks – in which a vital piece of evidence is hidden, hence the crookedness – is a supreme, distilled essence of Christie," Thompson says.

David Suchet, who played Poirot for well over 20 years on the small screen (beginning in 1989), and who became indelibly associated with the rotund detective, recalls his detailed preparations to capture the character as the author intended. "I read every book and made a dossier of all Poirot's characteristics: his clothes, the stripe of his trousers, his likes and dislikes, the lavender water on his hands, how his pictures had to be straight in his rooms. Especially how he spoke."

His desire for the role stemmed from the need to redress what he saw as a major oversight. "I couldn't help wondering why the character I found there had never been portrayed accurately on screen and said to myself, 'I'm going to play Poirot, I'm going to say yes to this because I'm going to play him as she [Christie] wrote him.' It was a challenge."

Over the years Suchet has pondered the source of Poirot's appeal. "He's quite opinionated. He has an enormous ego. He doesn't like the English upper classes. He's nice to servants and the lower classes; maybe that appeals? Or is it that he's on the side of right, that he wants to rid the world of evil. I think viewers also see him as lonely. He needs love in his life. Maybe that's what endears him to

them." Ultimately though, "I think people feel safe when they watch him. Poirot offers, perhaps, the greatest moral compass."

After chronicling 70 stories, the final TV episode took place in 2013 and Suchet says how much he still misses the character after achieving an international fame that remains today. "The wonderful success of Poirot obviously changed my life beyond recognition. After I finished filming the last episode, there was a grieving process. I'm still grieving now. Because Poirot was my best friend, my alter ego."

Overall Poirot appears in 33 novels, over 50 short stories and the play *Black Coffee*. In a 1938 *Daily Mail* article, Christie said her book *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, often considered her masterpiece, was one of Poirot's favourite cases, explaining that "he was at his best, investigating a crime in a quiet country village and using his knowledge of human nature to get at the truth."

For many years, Christie dramas on television were perceived as cosy domestic murder mysteries, perfect viewing for the Christmas holidays, as the author drew on her own extensive experience of country house life to portray different groups of middle-class folk. In recent times though, things have changed considerably as this image has been supplanted by significantly edgier Christie fare.

Dark festive adaptations have become the order of the day, courtesy of screenwriter Sarah Phelps. Phelps has written a quintet of Christie dramas, beginning with the acclaimed *And Then There Were None* in 2015 (and *The ABC Murders* starring John Malkovich as a laconic Poirot), then concluding with a truly distinctive version of *The Pale Horse*, which divided the nation. Many were unnerved by her subversive perspective, but Phelps maintained that it's the undercurrents in Christie's fiction which intrigue and which she is bringing to the surface.

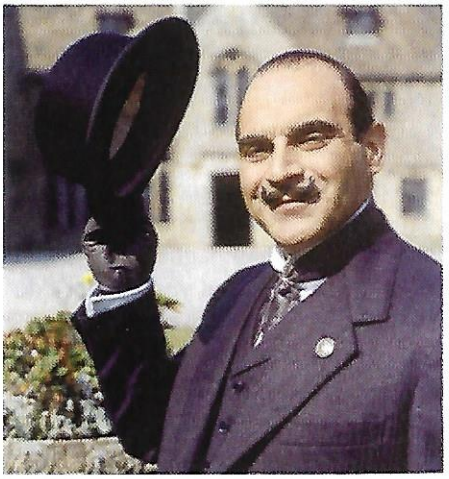
Sophie Hannah is a prominent crime writer who is today continuing the tradition of Hercule Poirot in a series of novels that began five years ago. The Christie estate is naturally protective of Agatha's legacy and Hannah was surprised that they gave their official blessing to the project after years of refusing to countenance such a proposition.

"I met the Christies, and they asked if I had an idea for a book. I hadn't, because I hadn't ever thought I would do it, but immediately realised that an idea I'd had, but never used, would be perfect for Poirot. They really liked it, and it proceeded from there. It's very surreal for me, and a huge honour."

Hannah is rapturous about the detective. "I love Poirot. He's a real person, full of wisdom and experience, and a superhero who arrives on the scene as if by magic the moment a murder has or is about to be committed. I adore him – and honestly don't find any of his mannerisms irritating at all. Agatha created him as flawed, but I love all his flaws. Once you've encountered Poirot, you can't forget him."

A measure of Poirot's tremendous appeal can be gauged from the fact that on his demise in *Curtain*, written during World War II but not published until 1975, he received a front-page obituary in *The New York Times*, the only literary character ever to receive such an honour. As biographer Laura Thompson perceptively explains in *A Mysterious Life*, the truth behind Poirot's first appearance in 1920 was essentially pure serendipity: "He was created in a way not even his creator perfectly understood: a felicitous stew of things heard, remembered, invented, mixed and dreamed in the spaces of Agatha's life, among the medicine bottles in the Torquay dispensary, along the uphill roads to Ashfield [her childhood home], over the Devon moors."

All that really matters now is Poirot's literary immortality which seems assured. As Sophie Hannah says today, "I think he's just the best character crime fiction has ever produced."



Top: Kenneth Branagh's Murder on the Orient Express, *2017; Middle: Albert Finney as Poirot in* Murder on the Orient Express, *1974; Bottom: David Suchet was Poirot for 24 years on ITV starting in 1989*

Sophie Hannah's The Killings at Kingfisher Hill *is out now, £20 (HarperCollins)*

Images: Shutterstock, Alamy