Murder on the Orient Express
Agatha Christie’s
Murder on the Orient Express
adapted for the stage by KEN LUDWIG
directed by RISA BRAININ
May 13 – July 2, 2023
McGuire Proscenium Stage

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About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Thanks for your interest in Murder on the Orient Express. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
**Synopsis**

“In the beginning it was an odyssey of deception and trickery. One minute I could see the light, like the beam of a train engine hurtling past. The next minute, all was darkness and the thread that I pulled came away in my fingers and led to nothing.”

– Hercule Poirot in *Murder on the Orient Express*

In Istanbul, Belgian detective Hercule Poirot books the final berth in the first-class car on the famed Orient Express railway. Among his fellow passengers are a Russian princess, a timid Swedish missionary, Scottish Colonel Arbuthnot, Englishwoman Mary Debenham, Helen Hubbard from Minnesota and American businessman Samuel Ratchett.

Ratchett tries to hire Poirot to discover who has sent him threatening letters, but the vacationing Poirot declines the job. After the train deparst, passengers settle into their berths and feel out their traveling companions. But their journey halts overnight when the train hits a snowdrift, and the passengers are unsettled when Mrs. Hubbard spies an intruder hurrying from her room.

The next morning, Ratchett is found dead in his locked berth with multiple stab wounds. Poirot quickly deduces that the murder is related to the kidnapping of Daisy Armstrong in America three years earlier. And with no tracks in the snow leading from the stalled train, Poirot realizes that the murderer is still on board.

**SETTING**

1934. The principal action takes place aboard the Orient Express as it travels from Istanbul to Western Europe.

**CHARACTERS**

- **Hercule Poirot**, a world-famous Belgian detective
- **Monsieur Bouc**, director of the Wagon-Lits train company
- **Samuel Ratchett**, an American businessman
- **Hector MacQueen**, assistant to Samuel Ratchett
- **Mary Debenham**, an English governess
- **Princess Dragomiroff**, a Russian aristocrat now living in France
- **Countess Andrenyi**, a Hungarian doctor
- **Colonel Arbuthnot**, a Scottish military officer
- **Greta Ohlsson**, a Swedish missionary
- **Helen Hubbard**, an American tourist
- **Michel**, conductor of the Orient Express
- **Head Waiter**, of the Tokatlian Hotel
Responses to *Murder on the Orient Express*

Although both the murder plot and the solution verge upon the impossible, Agatha Christie has contrived to make them appear quite convincing for the time being, and what more than that can a mystery addict desire?


[Murder on the Orient Express is] your best mystery bet of the moment by quite some distance — a thoroughly up-to-snuff Christie that ought to go down in history as one of the author’s slickest. Or should we say one of Hercule Poirot’s slickest since that famous sleuth is again on the trail, his egg-shaped head and amusing locutions working overtime? ...

One of Mrs. Christie’s charms is, of course, that she writes in the civilized manner, and that always helps. Then, her mystery technique is nothing short of swell. She’s probably the best suspicion scatterer and diverter in the business. If you find your old friend, credibility, seeming to slip in the later stages of this exciting tale, don’t worry — for Mrs. Christie is working up to something most unusual by this very means. ... Indeed, we’ll go so far as to say that [the novel] is a tour de force in the way of an artificial and no less gripping riddle.

Will Cuppy
Review of Murder on the Orient Express (also published as Murder in the Calais Coach), *New York Tribune Book Review*, March 4, 1934

After completing the film, [director Sidney] Lumet himself admitted the stylistic difficulties it had presented: “I did *Murder on the Orient Express* because I love melodrama. That’s all. I wanted to have fun. It turned out to be some of the hardest work I’ve ever done because the piece was highly stylized.”

The stylistic differences involved not only *mise en scene* but significant variations in the concept and revelation of character. In Christie’s novels, the efforts of the detective and the unfolding of the narrative produce gradual revelations of previously concealed information about character by the structural necessities of the mystery genre. ... In a Lumet film, on the other hand, very little stands in the way of a character’s steady and full psychological disclosure, and the way characters reveal themselves and the factors that compel their revelations are crucial.

Ina Rae Hark
“Twelve Angry People: Conflicting Revelatory Strategies in *Murder on the Orient Express*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1987

Poirot arranges to begin a series of interviews and plunges himself (and the rest of us) into a net of intrigue so deep, so deceptive and so labyrinthine that only Agatha Christie would have woven it. *Murder on the Orient Express* is a splendidly entertaining movie of the sort that isn’t made anymore: It’s a classical whodunnit, with all the clues planted and all of them visible, and it’s peopled with a large and expensive collection of stars. Albert Finney, who plays Poirot, is the most impressive. ... His hair is slicked down to a patent-leather shine, his eyes have somehow become beady and suspicious, his French mustache is constantly quivering with alarm (real and pretend) and he scurries up and down the train like a paranoid crab. The performance is brilliant, and it’s high comedy.

Roger Ebert
“*Murder on the Orient Express* review,” January 1, 1974
To be making the most famous and iconic Poirot story Agatha Christie ever wrote is possibly the most daunting task I’ve had in over 20 years of filming Poirot.

Albert Finney got an Oscar nomination for his portrayal as Poirot, so to be making it again is a real challenge. ...

I think our adaptation differs primarily from its script. If you have a different script then you have a different adaptation. This is more of a psychological drama: We are, right from the beginning, faced with Poirot in a different frame of mind to how we’ve ever seen him before.

Tragic occurrences happen before Poirot even steps on the train which affect him very much. First, a man commits suicide as a result of his evidence, and then he witnesses a stoning in Istanbul. We see him, in both instances, full of his own self-justification and almost self-righteousness, saying, “Well, that’s the world — it’s nothing to do with me.” Then he boards the Orient Express and is later approached by this horrible man, Samuel Ratchett, who asks him for protection. Poirot turns him down because he takes an instant dislike to him. Having turned Ratchett’s offer down, the man is later found dead. And so we’re dealing with a very different Poirot. You can’t make Poirot the same as he’s always been with those three things happening in his life. It’s really a psychological journey for Poirot, one that absolutely breaks him. The decision he is forced to make at the end forces him to drop his whole *raison d’être*, which is ridding the world of crime. He is made to dig deep and finally do the right thing against his better judgement. And so the journey of the Orient Express is really the journey of Poirot on the Orient Express. ...

The tension really starts after Ratchett’s murder because, unlike any other moments we have seen over the years when Poirot encounters a dead body and says, “Ah! We must now look at this or do this,” the first thing you’ll see with Poirot is his guilt. He didn’t save Ratchett’s life. He rejected the offer to protect him, just because he didn’t like him. And that changes Poirot for the whole story.

David Suchet
Actor who has played Poirot in countless versions, ITV interview, 2010

I just directed a production of *Hamlet* this last autumn. And I went back to it just feeling not dissimilar, frankly, to the thematic material of *Murder on the Orient Express*, that there was a sort of cry in the play that spoke to me in the here and now for an acknowledgment of the passing of people. You know, there’s a great line in Arthur Miller’s *play Death of a Salesman* — attention must be paid. There’s a sense in *Murder on the Orient Express* that the desire for accountability for those who have suffered silently screams loudly out of the story. And I think it does in a different way from *Hamlet*. 

Kenneth Branagh
In an interview about *Murder on the Orient Express* on “All Things Considered,” November 10, 2017
Agatha Christie: A Master of Mystery

Agatha Christie (born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller) was born on September 15, 1890, in Torquay, Devon, England. She was homeschooled by her father, an American. Her mother wanted him to wait until Agatha was 8 for her to learn to read, but the determined little girl taught herself by the age of 5, signaling her lifelong love affair with the written word.

Agatha’s father died when she was only 11, which put her and her mother into financial uncertainty. They were able to overcome it, and Agatha continued her pursuits of music and writing into her early adulthood, skillfully playing the piano and writing short stories. When Agatha was 20, she and her mother went to Cairo to spend “the season” where she found her social niche, attended parties and found herself fielding marriage proposals. In 1912, Agatha met Archie Christie, an aviator, and the two had a whirlwind courtship that led to their marriage on Christmas Eve 1914 while Archie was on leave from the French front of World War I.

During the war, Christie wrote her first detective story to win a bet with her sister and relieve the boredom from her day job at the hospital dispensary. Her debut novel, in which Poirot makes his first appearance, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was accepted by The Bodley Head publishers in 1919 and published in 1920. They then contracted her for five more novels. In the original manuscript, Christie had the story end in a
courtroom. Her publisher, John Lane, suggested it end with a reveal in the library, which became a signature mystery device for years to come.

After the war, Agatha and Archie welcomed daughter Rosalind in 1919. Artistically, Christie experimented with different types of mystery and thriller stories, creating her well-known characters Tommy, Tuppence and Miss Marple. After several years of feeling she was being taken advantage of, Christie switched publishers to William Collins and Sons. Archie and Agatha traveled across what was then the British Empire to promote the Empire Exhibition of 1924. Upon their return, Christie’s mother died and she struggled with the burden of grief as well as strain on her marriage due to her husband having an affair.

In early December 1926, Christie left Rosalind in the care of servants without any indication of where she was going. Her car was found abandoned the next morning. A nationwide search concluded with the finding of Christie 11 days later at a hotel in Harrogate, where she had no recollection of who she was or how she had gotten there. After Archie collected her from Harrogate, the two remained apart and divorced in 1928. As Christie recovered from her psychological stress, she struggled to write but eventually found her way back to her novels, creating her first story in her pen name, Mary Westmacott, in 1928. In 1928, she also traveled on the Orient Express, a desire she had held for many years.

On that journey, Christie visited an archeological site in Ur, where she met the Woolleys who ran the dig and would become her close friends. The following year, she returned to the site and met her second husband Max Mallowan, a 25-year-old aspiring archaeologist. The two were married in September 1930. They both loved adventure and it carried into their life together, with a rotating yearly schedule of time at home in England and out in the field, where Christie continued to write two to three novels a year. Once Max returned after the war, she began to slow her prolific writing and enjoy her family and home. The 40s and 50s also saw Christie getting more involved in writing and producing for the stage, which consumed much of her time. Her last public appearance was at the premiere of the film adaptation of Murder on the Orient Express. Christie died peacefully on January 12, 1976.

Christie’s legacy cannot be overstated. She created some of the most memorable characters in fiction, and she remains one of the most prolific and bestselling authors of all time. She wrote 66 novels, 14 short story collections and the world’s longest running play, The Mousetrap. 2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the publication of her first novel. She was a woman who knew what readers wanted and lived her life by her own rules, adventuring and creating, and we all are the beneficiaries of her greatness.
The Queen of Crime, the Duchess of Death

By Richard J Roberts
Resident Dramaturg,
Indiana Repertory Theatre

Agatha Christie is the world’s best-known writer of mystery fiction. She wrote some 80 books and 19 plays, and her work has been translated into 103 languages. More than 150 movies and television programs have been adapted from her works.

In the golden age of the English detective story, Christie was the genre’s leading author. The years between the two World Wars were times of great change in Britain. A depression crippled the economy. The nation’s dominance as a global empire was crumbling. Moral standards, social customs and hemlines were changing. The wealthy found it increasingly difficult to hire household servants and even more challenging to afford those they could find.

Christie wrote of a stable, serene, old-fashioned world that readers fondly recognized: Elegant country houses located in quaint rural villages were populated by large extended families and close-knit communities of quirky, eccentric characters. Class distinctions were clearly maintained. Christie’s work avoided politics and other controversial topics, focusing on the niceties of social interaction and good manners. The intrusion of a murder into such portraits of stability and comfort only added to the appeal. The victim often turned out to be a disagreeable person who would not be missed, while the careful deduction of clues and the ultimate arrest of the murderer reinforced the propriety and stability of the social system. (While the elegant, luxurious and very European setting of Murder on the Orient Express is a definite departure from Christie’s typical

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country estate setting, the book otherwise follows most of the author’s usual patterns.)

Although Christie’s villains may have used extremely complicated plans, her novels were not impossible fictions; they were firmly grounded in everyday reality. Christie’s books allowed readers to feel as if they were exercising their brains while being entertained. If the careful reader studied the clues and guessed the solution, they were proud of themselves. If not, they were impressed by the author. Either way, the reader had a good time.

Christie’s worldview was conservative and rational, but there was always a place for accidents. In 1937’s *Dumb Witness*, she wrote, “Does it not strike you that the easiest way of removing someone you want to remove from your path is to take advantage of accident? Accidents are happening all the time. And sometimes — they can be helped to happen!”

Long after Christie’s death, science fiction writer Brian Aldiss revealed that Christie once told him she wrote her books up to the last chapter and then decided who the least likely suspect was. She would then go back and make the necessary changes to frame that person. Christie was particularly renowned for her surprise twist endings.

Christie’s greatest creation was the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, whom she featured in 33 novels. She also wrote 12 novels featuring Miss Jane Marple, an elderly spinster. Where Poirot’s detective skills focused on logic and rational thinking, Miss Marple relied on her feminine sensitivity and empathy to solve crimes. Miss Marple was a typically English character, a lifelong resident of the fictional village of St. Mary Mead. Neither Poirot nor Marple had any family life, but Poirot traveled a great deal. A former police officer, he had been forced to flee his native Belgium after the German invasion in 1914. Both characters were eccentric, but while Poirot was exotic and amusing with his egotism and waxed moustache, Miss Marple was as comfortable and endearing as an old friend. She is thought to have been based on the author’s grandmother. Christie is the only mystery writer to have created not one but two major detective figures.

She always gave a logical explanation for the crimes her villains committed, but Christie did not blame society: Murder was not a sign of the degeneration of middle-class values. After the crime was solved, life continued happily. As her writing career continued over six decades, she remained aware of social change. “When I re-read those first books,” she said in 1966, “I’m amazed at the number of servants drifting around. And nobody is really doing any work; they’re always having tea on the lawn.”

Christie remains the bestselling novelist of all time, with a billion copies sold in English and another billion in other languages. She is the most widely published novelist of all time in any language, outsold only by Shakespeare and the Bible. As *The New York Times Book Review* said, Christie “entertained more people for more hours at a time than any other writer of her generation.”

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This feature originally appeared in the Indiana Repertory Theatre’s *Murder on the Orient Express* study guide. It has been reprinted with permission and edited for style.
Among her many literary creations, Agatha Christie has the distinction of creating not just one, but two indelible and well-known detectives in Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, who headline many novels and stories, as well as other leading and supporting characters of note featured in her work.

**Hercule Poirot**, a world-famous detective now retired from the Belgian police force and resettled in Britain after World War I. He often pooh-poohs legwork and hands-on investigation in favor of sitting and using his “little grey cells,” and his eyes often give off a green glint when he works out a solution. He’s known for and often recognized by his famous luxurious mustache, his egg-shaped head, his fastidious appearance and his short stature. He appears in 33 novels and more than 50 short stories.

Poirot is often surrounded by old friends and colleagues in his stories, including his friend Colonel Hastings, who accompanies him on many of his investigations; Inspector Japp, of Scotland Yard; his loyal valet George, whom the French-speaking Poirot calls Georges; his efficient secretary Miss Lemon; and the novelist Ariadne Oliver, a writer of crime fiction (and alter-ego of Agatha Christie herself), who created a famous Finnish detective and is extraordinarily fond of apples.

**Miss Jane Marple**, an unassuming elderly lady and amateur sleuth with great powers of observation who lives in the village of St. Mary Mead. She often draws conclusions in the cases she solves by referring to experience she has acquired in observing human behavior in her village. She is featured in 12 novels and numerous short stories.

Among the recurring characters in her novels are her nephew Raymond West and his wife Joan, a rotation of maids she trains in her preferred ways and a live-in companion, Cherry Baker.

**Tommy and Tuppence**, old friends who meet again after World War I and go into the adventure business together, eventually falling in love and getting married. Tuppence’s charisma and intuition are offset by Tommy’s deliberation and clear-sightedness. They age over the course of their four novels and several short stories, and they raise three children.

**Harley Quin and Mr. Satterthwaite**, a pair of gentlemen who solve crimes together. Quin has a mysterious, elusive, almost supernatural quality and leads Mr. Satterthwaite to the appropriate conclusion. Quin was a favorite character of Christie and inspired by the commedia dell’arte character Harlequin. Over the course of the stories, Quin evolves to suggest he’s part of Satterthwaite’s subconscious rather than a separate person. The pair appears in numerous short stories.

**Parker Pyne**, a large, bald, English private detective with twinkling eyes whose work is usually centered on helping clients find happiness (rather than to solve a crime) and who advertises his services in the newspaper. He is retired from a government job and uses his skills in later life to cure unhappiness. He appears in several short stories.

Among his regular compatriots are Claude Luttrell and Madeline de Sara, both of whom excel at disguises, and Miss Lemon and Ariadne Oliver, who also appear in Poirot’s stories.

**MARY WESTMACOTT**

Another “creation” of Agatha Christie is Mary Westmacott, the pseudonym under which she wrote six semi-autobiographical novels in which she could explore familial relationships and human psychology (i.e., not detective stories): *Giant’s Bread* (1930), *Unfinished Portrait* (1934), *Absent in the Spring* (1944), *The Rose and the Yew Tree* (1948), *A Daughter’s a Daughter* (1952) and *The Burden* (1956).
Responses to Agatha Christie

**The New York Times**

There are doubtless many detective stories more exciting and blood-curdling than *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, but this reviewer has recently read very few which provide greater analytical stimulation. ...

In conventional detective-story style, seemingly trivial and extraneous details become clarifying evidence to [Hercule Poirot] while they baffle the reader only the more. It is really Poirot's method which holds the reader's interest. Matters become more and more complicated, till one surprising fact after another begins to reveal itself. ... Miss Christie is not only an expert technician and a remarkably good story-teller, but she knows, as well, just the right number of hints to offer as to the real murderer.


**The Saturday Review of Literature**

For those who prefer certain backgrounds to others for their mystery tales, we may say that Miss Christie's are always English in setting. To those who hate "loose ends," we may remark that this author ties all her knots neatly and bites off the thread. Her characterization is sharp in outline, her motivation is sound, complications of the plot never "get away from her." Everything in the puzzle falls neatly into place, and the complete picture leaves upon us an ineradicable impression. There are no inexplicable and glozed-over details. It is all an almost mathematical demonstration so far as the fundamental brainwork goes. Yet that is no mere clever intellectual exercise; witness the fact that the reader is left with the strongest emotions of pity and wonder of the disastrous coil the weak and erring weave. There are indications, in fact, of an even deeper psychological insight than can be actively exercised in a book of this kind.

William Rose Benét

**The Canadian Forum**

Mrs. Christie is known to all connoisseurs of detective stories as beyond comparison the finest practitioner of this delightful craft. She should long ago have received the Order of Merit, as having given more and richer pleasure to the English-speaking race than all other living persons, except perhaps Mr. Chaplin, Mr. Shaw and Mr. Wodehouse. It is marvellous that anyone should invent a new method of putting experienced readers off the scent, but almost beyond belief that this should be done repeatedly by one writer.

Gilbert Norwood
“Another Christie,” *The Canadian Forum*, April 1938

[And Then There Were None] is as near a perfect crime puzzle as we are likely to see. It is short, sans Poirot, exciting, baffling and scrupulously fair. To divulge any of the plot would be to take the edge off the reader’s enjoyment. It should be enough to say that the book is Agatha Christie’s masterpiece.

Rupert Hart-Davies
*The Spectator*, December 15, 1939
Agatha Christie’s indelibly etched characters have entertained millions across the years and a love of her work has brought together generations of readers — a singular achievement for any author and an inspiration to writers across the literary landscape.

Jacqueline Winspear
Creator of the Maisie Dobbs novels, www.jacquelinewinspear.com

I strongly suspect that future scholars of the simon-pure detective novel will hold that its greatest practitioner, outranking even Ellery Queen and John Dickinson Carr in their best periods, has been Agatha Christie — not only for her incomparable plot construction, but for her extraordinary ability to limn character and era with so few (and such skilled) strokes. And while Queen and Carr have offered recent books well below their highest standards, Christie, at 76, is virtually as good as ever.

Anthony Boucher

Now that she has killed off her most famous character, it seems right to say something about Agatha Christie’s own achievement. She is one of the much-diminished band of classical detective-story writers, for whom the detective and the puzzle are the thing. In recent years, she had made some formal concessions to modernity, but none to the way life is actually lived. There are no more butlers and housemaids in her books, but nobody is seen doing any work. People may be labeled doctor, lawyer, secretary, accountant, but what they really are is suspects in a murder puzzle. They live in a world remote from the mugging of the 87th precinct, the sexual or financial streets of Simenon’s provincial France or the seedy violence of Raymond Chandler’s California. Like her contemporaries Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie was not only a lady but also ladylike, and she did not care to write about such things. Her books, like those of her sisters in crime, say something about manners but nothing about life. Yet within her chosen and unstrained limits, this serpent of old Thames has given all detective-story addicts immense enjoyment, and she has been the champion deceiver of our time.

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Ken Ludwig has had six shows on Broadway, seven in London’s West End and many of his works have become a standard part of the American repertoire. His 32 plays and musicals have been performed in over 30 countries in more than 20 languages and are produced throughout the U.S. every night of the year.

*Lend Me a Tenor* won two Tony Awards and was called “one of the classic comedies of the 20th century by *The Washington Post*. *Crazy for You* was on Broadway for five years and won the Tony and Olivier Awards for Best Musical.

In addition, he has won the Edgar Award for Best Mystery of the Year, two Laurence Olivier Awards, two Helen Hayes Awards and the Edwin Forrest Award for Contributions to the American Theater. His plays have starred, among others, Alec Baldwin, Carol Burnett, Tony Shalhoub, Joan Collins and Hal Holbrook.

His stage version of *Murder on the Orient Express* was written expressly at the request of the Agatha Christie Estate and had its European premiere at the Chichester Festival Theatre in June 2022. His play *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* won the 2020 Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play.

His newest plays include *Lend Me a Soprano*, which premiered at the Alley Theatre in fall 2022; *Moriarty*, opening at Cleveland Play House in spring 2023; *Pride and Prejudice, Part 2: Napoleon at Pemberley*; and *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*.

His book *How To Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, published by Penguin Random House, won the Falstaff Award for Best Shakespeare Book of the Year, and his essays are published in *The Yale Review*.

He is a graduate of Harvard and Cambridge and is a frequent guest speaker for groups as varied as the Oxford and Cambridge Society, Jane Austen Society of North America, Folger Shakespeare Library and The Baker Street Irregulars.
Why Do Mysteries Grab Us?

by Ken Ludwig

About four years ago, our family went on vacation in England, and during the London portion of the trip, we went to the theatre and saw The Mousetrap by Agatha Christie. As you may know, The Mousetrap is the longest-running play in history. ...

As I watched the play unfold that night and saw the joy that it gave to our entire family, I resolved to try and write a mystery of my own. However, I knew, even then, that I wouldn’t have a chance of writing a good one until I figured out the allure of mysteries on the stage, and how and why the great ones entertain us so powerfully.

I started by reading every good mystery play I could lay my hands on. ... What I learned from all my reading is that the greatest mystery plays written in the past hundred years have certain elements in common, and by recognizing these elements, I was able to understand more deeply the genre I was trying to tackle. Here is a summary of some of the lessons I learned from my foray into the literature of mysteries.

1. The greatest mystery plays are plotted meticulously. They’re not character studies of a freewheeling nature; that’s not their territory. ...

2. The plots of great mystery plays are relentlessly linear. Mysteries take us on a ride, starting at the beginning and driving straight through to the end.

3. The greatest mystery plays, like the greatest plays of any kind, somehow, almost magically, have resonances to other, deeper layers of meaning. ...

4. Mysteries by their very nature contain certain recurring themes. These usually include questions about death, about justice and about appearance versus reality. ...

5. Finally, what we’re really seeking when we look for answers in a mystery is a sense of order. In The Game’s Afoot; or Holmes for the Holidays, I have the inspector in the play, Inspector Goring, say to the protagonist, William Gillette (the actor who played Sherlock Holmes onstage for over 30 years): “Order from chaos. Order from chaos. It’s what I do.”

In a sense, that’s the very definition of a mystery. Order from chaos. It’s what they do. 

Tell us about the origins of your adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express*.

My agent called one morning and said that the Agatha Christie Limited had been in touch to ask whether I would be interested in adapting one of Christie’s novels for the stage. I was immensely flattered, of course, and I was put in touch with Mathew Prichard, Agatha Christie’s grandson, who was then running the company.

Why did you choose *Murder on the Orient Express*? It is such a stunning mystery in so many ways. The setting is exotic, the characters are colourful and, though the names are changed, it’s based on an historical event — the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby — which dominated the news at the time the book was written. That historical context gives the story special consequence: This shocking crime has gone unsolved, and the killer is aboard the Orient Express. …

There are some wonderfully funny moments in the show. How did you tease out the humour in the story? The characters created by Dame Agatha in the book gave me enormous scope for invention. Think of Mrs. Hubbard, the Midwestern American divorcee with a flair for the dramatic; the Hungarian countess who is romantic and beautiful, yet down to earth and highly intelligent; the nervous secretary who is scared of his own shadow; the haughty, ancient Russian princess who was forced out of her country during the revolution and has been bitter about it ever since. These are characters to savour, and I loved the opportunity to expand upon them through the lens of the stage and to highlight their comic potential.

You are most well known for your comic plays. What got you interested in writing mysteries?

From as long as I can remember, my goal in life was writing comedies for the stage. Lucky me, I had some success, and then one summer I visited a castle in Connecticut built by William Gillette. Gillette was the man who wrote the first great play about Sherlock Holmes and portrayed the character onstage for over 30 years, starting in the 1890s. This inspired me to write a mystery that takes place at the castle during the visit of Gillette’s Broadway cast for a weekend of romance and murder. … I suddenly realized the special joy of writing mysteries for the stage.
Inspirations for *Murder on the Orient Express*

**THE LINDBERGH KIDNAPPING**

On March 1, 1932, around 9 p.m., 20-month-old Charles Augustus Lindbergh, Jr. was kidnapped from his second floor nursery. He was the son of famous pilot Charles Lindbergh and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. A ransom note asking for $50,000 was left in the nursery, along with mud and footprints. Household employees were interrogated, the Lindbergh’s friends tried to communicate with the kidnappers and many avenues were exhausted for the baby’s safe return. In all, 13 separate ransom notes were left with various parties over the course of several months. The search for the Lindbergh baby consumed the country, not only because of the fame of his father, but also because of the horrific nature of the crime.

On May 12, the body of the baby was accidentally found several miles from the Lindbergh home. After medical examination, it was determined that the child had been killed close to the date of his kidnapping. While the mystery of where the Lindbergh baby had gone had come to a tragic close, the perpetrators were still at large.

At the onset of the case, federal authorities were called to assist in an advisory capacity due to the high-profile identity of the victim, but once the child was found murdered, the FBI took on primary responsibility for apprehending the culprit. In June, an employee of Mrs. Lindbergh’s mother, who had been under investigation, committed suicide before she was to be questioned. She was later deemed uninvolved in the crime.

Even President Roosevelt tried to aid the case at one point, directing all gold and gold certificates (with which much of the ransom was paid) to be returned to the Treasury Department. Serial numbers of the ransom money were distributed to banking institutions in the New York and New Jersey areas. Thousands of people wrote letters and gave tips, many of which were false, to try to help the authorities capture the killer. Con men even duped well-meaning people with promises to return the child to them so they could return him to his family. Thousands of leads were shared with the FBI, including the circulation of currency that was included in the ransom, but to no avail.

On September 18, 1934, a gold certificate for $10 arrived at Corn Exchange Bank and Trust, which was then tracked to a local gas station where a suspicious attendant had taken down the license plate of the man who paid with it. The authorities used that information to apprehend Bruno Richard Hauptmann, who had other ransom money in his home and fit the description given by a person connected with the case.

Hauptmann was put on trial on mostly circumstantial evidence and was convicted of first-degree murder. Exhausting all appeals, Hauptmann was executed on April 3, 1936.
THE REAL ORIENT EXPRESS

In 1865, Belgian Georges Nagelmackers envisioned “a train that would span a continent, running on a continuous ribbon of metal for more than 1,500 miles,” as described by E.H. Cookridge in Orient Express: The Life and Times of the World’s Most Famous Train. After a number of complications, Nagelmackers’ vision was finally realized when Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (sleeper cars) launched its route from Paris to Istanbul, dubbed by the newspapers “The Orient Express.” Nagelmackers embraced the name, and a legend was born.

On October 4, 1883, journalists and passengers packed the luxury train, marveling at the beautiful finishing, “spacious” cabins and high-class amenities. The journey from Paris to Istanbul lasted about 80 hours. The Orient Express became a symbol of the height of luxury in the world of travel and travel of the world.

In its heyday, the train took on several monikers denoting its various lives and significance beyond its role as a mode of transport. Known as “The King of Trains” not only for its elevated luxury, but also for the royals and dignitaries it transported, the train had a more clandestine name as well. Also dubbed the “Spies’ Express,” secret agents loved traveling aboard because it made their jobs easier and their journeys more comfortable. The train even took on a larger significance in both world wars as the site of the signing of the German surrender in World War I and later as the site of the French surrender to the Germans in World War II. When Nazi loss was imminent, Hitler ordered the destruction of the car so it would not “become a trophy of the Allies once more.”

Over the years, the pedigree of the Orient Express lost some of its luster as copycats and other routes took on the name and variations thereof. Some even embraced the fictional world of the train, asking patrons to dress in costume or to reenact murder mystery role plays. Today, the Venice Simplon-Orient-Express aims to restore some of the grandeur and luxury of the original for those wishing to take a journey back in time to the train’s decadent past.

Cookridge sums up the world of the original Orient Express thusly: “Kings and crooks, millionaires and refugees, big-game hunters and smugglers, prima donnas and courtesans traveled on it; tycoons and financiers clinched their deals across its sumptuous dining tables; diplomats, spies, and revolutionaries on board the train moved secretly to their moments of history.” This intrigue, cast of interesting characters, opulent luxury and breathtaking scenery is what drew Agatha Christie to journey on the Orient Express and inspired her to write one of her most famous murders in its cars.

Another incident that contributed to the story of Murder on the Orient Express occurred in 1929, when the westbound train became stuck in snow for five days at Çerkezköy, about 80 miles from Istanbul.

This feature was written by Lindsey Hoel-Neds and originally appeared in Milwaukee Rep’s Murder on the Orient Express study guide. It has been reprinted with permission and edited for style.
Hercule Poirot

The world-famous Belgian detective is arguably Agatha Christie’s most notable creation, one about whom she had mixed feelings at times. Numerous actors have portrayed him on radio, on television and in film. Upon the publication of Curtain, the final Poirot story, The New York Times published an obituary for the fictional character.

The New York Times

Hercule Poirot, a Belgian detective who became internationally famous, has died in England. His age was unknown.

Mr. Poirot achieved fame as a private investigator after he retired as a member of the Belgian police force in 1904. His career, as chronicled in the novels of Dame Agatha Christie, his creator, was one of the most illustrious in fiction.

At the end of his life, he was arthritic and had a bad heart. He was in a wheelchair often and was carried from his bedroom to the public lounge at Styles Court, a nursing home in Essex, wearing a wig and false mustaches to mask the signs of age that offended his vanity. In his active days, he was always impeccably dressed.

Mr. Poirot, who was just 5 feet 4 inches tall, went to England from Belgium during World War I as a refugee. He settled in a little town not far from Styles, then an elaborate country estate, where he took on his first private case.

The news of his death, given by Dame Agatha, was not unexpected. Word that he was near death reached here last May.

His death was confirmed by Dodd, Mead, Dame Agatha’s publishers, who will put out Curtain, the novel that chronicles his last days, on Oct. 15.

The Poirot of the final volume is only a shadow of the well-turned-out, agile investigator who, with a charming but immense ego and fractured English, solved unaccounted mysteries in the 37 full-length novels and collections of short stories in which he appeared.

Dame Agatha reports in Curtain that he managed, in one final gesture, to perform one more act of cerebration that saved an innocent bystander from disaster. “Nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it,” to quote Shakespeare, whom Poirot frequently misquoted.

Thomas Lask

Twenty-five years ago, [David] Suchet was asked to play Agatha Christie’s fussy little Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, in an ITV drama series set eternally in his late-1930s world. Suchet’s brother John, the ITV newsreader, warned him off the role — “I wouldn’t touch it with a barge pole,” he told him, “It’s not you at all” — and Suchet himself hadn’t read any of the books. But he agreed. And next week, as Poirot solves his final case on ITV, Suchet will say adieu to the character who has become the defining — and best-loved — figure of his career. …

“I haven’t fully mourned him yet,” says Suchet gently. “I suppose that will come. And I will miss him from my life until I die. But everybody has their time. And this is his.” …

A few actors have become, like Suchet, the living embodiment of a literary detective. John Thaw did it with Inspector Morse; Raymond Burr did it with Perry Mason. Jeremy Brett’s Sherlock Holmes has his champions, while my mother maintains that Miss Marple should have been officially retired from the television after Joan Hickson’s definitive depiction. But none can claim the longevity of Suchet’s Poirot. …

[W]hen Curtain airs, Suchet will have completed the entire Poirot canon, committing 70 novels and short stories to camera. …

Christie’s plots, in which death visits the village fete and heiresses lose the family jewels, can of course look ludicrously quaint against the modern diet of Scandi-noir or the endless slew of American forensics. But in a world of angst-ridden, morally compromised crime busters, the robust egotism and moral rectitude of Hercule Poirot are almost a comfort. “He has a great humanity, which I would like more of,” says Suchet. “A love of people. And a sense of right. He won’t do what he believes is wrong, and I think the audience likes that.”

He has said he could be persuaded to return to his portrayal of Poirot if ever funding emerged for a big-screen version, but he won’t be doing turns at home, he assures me. “Although one thing I’ve inherited from him is that when something surprising happens I will go: ‘Oh la!’” And while he will miss the glorious, glamorous locations — Paris, Egypt, Tunisia — he won’t miss the padding that was his constant companion in them. A cruise down the Nile, trapped in Poirot’s body? He wags a finger in a distinctly Belgian way. “Impossible! Absolutely impossible!”

Emma John, interviewing actor David Suchet upon release of Curtain


Branagh has added considerable depth to his portrayal of Poirot, making him more active, more passionate and more lonely. “The screenplay caught a hurt and a more tangible isolation in Poirot,” Branagh explains. “There is a kind of vulnerability about this man who appears in The Mysterious Affair at Styles with a touching gratitude to England for looking after Belgian refugees. There’s the sense of someone who has already felt the bruises of the world.”

Did he not feel any trepidation about taking on a character who has already been portrayed by 20 actors, including Orson Welles, Peter Ustinov and, on TV, David Suchet? “It’s a lot isn’t it?” says Branagh with that disarming smile. “I guess that’s where my thickish skin comes into it. You do understand that the reason so many people have played him is because he’s a fantastic character.” …

“With the amount of source material in the novels, every actor is going to bring something unique and unusual, in the same way as would happen with a famous classical part.”

Sarah Crompton, interviewing actor/director Kenneth Branagh

“Kenneth Branagh: ‘I want you to smell the steam of the Orient Express,’” The Guardian, October 27, 2017
Discovering More Detective Fiction

Besides Agatha Christie, here are a few of the best writers in the genre.

**EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809–1849)**
One of the early American practitioners of the short story, best known for his tales of the macabre and mystery. His classic “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) is considered one of the first detective stories.

**ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (1859–1930)**
Scottish author most noted for his four novels and 56 short stories about the detective Sherlock Holmes, which are generally considered a major innovation in the field of crime fiction. A brilliant, London-based detective, Holmes is famous for his prowess at using logic and astute observation to solve cases. He is perhaps the most famous fictional detective and indeed one of the best known and most universally recognizable literary characters.

**G.K. CHESTERTON (1874–1936)**
English theologian who wrote 51 short stories featuring amateur sleuth Father Brown, a London parish priest with remarkable powers of deduction.

**DOROTHY L. SAYERS (1893–1957)**
English writer best known for her novels and short stories set between World War I and World War II that feature amateur sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey, who solved crimes with wit and style.

**DASHIELL HAMMETT (1894–1961)**
American author of hard-boiled detective novels and short stories. Among the enduring characters he created are Sam Spade (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1930) and Nick and Nora Charles (*The Thin Man*, 1934). A number of Hammett’s books inspired great films.

**RAYMOND CHANDLER (1888–1959)**
His influence on modern crime fiction has been immense, particularly in the writing style and attitudes that much of the field has adopted over the last 60 years. Along with Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade, Chandler’s Philip Marlowe has become synonymous with the tradition of the hard-boiled private detective in such novels as *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953). Several of Chandler’s books became classics of film noir.

**Rex Stout (1886–1975)**

**ELLERY QUEEN (1929–1971)**
Ellery Queen is a pseudonym used by two cousins from Brooklyn, New York: Frederic Dannay and Manfred Bennington Lee. In a successful series of novels that covered 42 years, Ellery Queen was not only the name of the author, but also that of the detective-hero of the stories. Movies, radio shows and television shows have been based on these works.

**SUE GRAFTON (1940–2017)**
American author of detective novels written from the perspective of a female private investigator named Kinsey Millhone. Grafton’s first book of this series is “A” is for *Alibi*, written in 1982. The series continues with “B” is for *Burglar*, “C” is for *Corpses* and so on through “Y” is for *Yesterday*, published months before her death.

**Notable Series**
The *Hardy Boys* is a popular series of more than 300 detective-adventure books chronicling the fictional adventures of teenage brothers Frank and Joe Hardy, ages 17 and 18. The first Hardy Boys book was published in 1927, and the series continues today.

Nancy Drew is the heroine of more than 175 mystery books; the series first appeared in 1930 and is still going strong. Nancy is an independent-minded 18-year-old. Besides participating in athletics and the arts, she maintains an active social, volunteer and sleuthing schedule.

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This feature was edited by Richard J Roberts and originally appeared in the Indiana Repertory Theatre’s *Murder on the Orient Express* study guide. It has been reprinted with permission and edited for style.
For Further Reading and Understanding

SELECTED FICTION BY AGATHA CHRISTIE
Featuring Her Most Famous Detectives
• The Murder at the Vicarage, 1930. Introduces Miss Marple.
• Murder on the Orient Express, originally published as Murder in the Calais Coach, 1934. Features Hercule Poirot.
• N or M?, 1941. Features Tommy and Tuppence during World War II.

Other Favorites
• And Then There Were None, 1940.
• Towards Zero, 1944.
• Crooked House, 1948.
• Ordeal by Innocence, 1958.
• Endless Night, 1967.

SELECTED PLAYS BY AGATHA CHRISTIE
Black Coffee, 1930.
And Then There Were None, 1943. Original and alternate endings.
Appointment With Death, 1945. Based on her novel but sans Poirot.
The Mousetrap, 1952. The longest-running play of all time.
Witness for the Prosecution, 1953.
The Unexpected Guest, 1958.

NONFICTION BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

BOOKS ABOUT AGATHA CHRISTIE
A is for Arsenic: The Poisons of Agatha Christie by Kathryn Harkup. Bloomsbury Sigma, 2012. Poison was the most common murder method used by Christie in her books, and Harkup dives deep into the poisons used in 14 of Christie’s novels.
Poirot and Me by David Suchet. Headline, 2014. The actor’s memoir of playing the Belgian detective for nearly 25 years.

SELECTED PLAYS BY KEN LUDWIG
Original Plays
• Be My Baby
• Dear Jack, Dear Louise
• Leading Ladies
• Lend Me a Tenor
• Lend Me a Soprano
• Moon Over Buffalo
• Shakespeare in Hollywood

Adaptations
• Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express
• Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery
• The Game’s Afoot; or Holmes for the Holidays
• Moriarty
• Treasure Island
• The Adventures of Robin Hood
• The Three Musketeers
• Tiny Tim’s Christmas Carol (with Jack Ludwig)
• The Beaux’ Strategem (with Thornton Wilder)

Musicals
• Crazy for You (music and lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin)
• An American in Paris (music and lyrics by George and Ira Gershwin)
• The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (music and lyrics by Don Schlitz)

PODCASTS
All About Agatha (Christie). Hosted by Catherine Brobeck and Kemper Donovan, this podcast analyzes and ranks all 66 of Christie’s mystery novels. Since 2022, Donovan has conducted interviews with other Christie fans.
www.kemperdonovan.com/podcast

WEBSITES
Ken Ludwig’s Official Website. Maintained by the author, the website offers extensive information about his plays and musicals as well as a section titled “Thoughts on Comedy” that features his essays and speeches on comedy and more.
www.kenludwig.com

The Home of Agatha Christie. A treasure trove of information about Christie maintained by Agatha Christie Limited, the company set up by Christie in 1955 to manage the literary and media rights to her work.
www.agathachristie.com

International Agatha Christie Festival. A nonprofit that promotes participation in literature and the arts and aids the economic growth of the borough of Torbay by hosting an annual festival devoted to Christie’s life and legacy in her birthplace in South Devon, England. The 2023 festival is September 8-17.
www.iacf-uk.org