



# Murder on the Orient Express

Agatha Christie



## About the author

Agatha Christie was born in 1890 in Devon, England. She was the youngest child of a rich American stockbroker and an English mother. Her father died when she was eleven and Agatha became very attached to her mother. She never attended school because her mother disapproved of it, and she was educated at home in a house full of books. As a young woman, Agatha was described as tall with reddish-gold hair, fun and bright company, although shy at times. She married Colonel Archibald Christie in 1914 and in 1919, she gave birth to her only child, Rosalind. They divorced in 1928. Two years earlier, following the death of her mother, Agatha Christie had completely disappeared for ten days. She married for a second time in 1930. She had a phenomenal literary career as a writer of crime stories. She published 66 novels, 154 short stories and 20 plays. Her book sales are only surpassed by those of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. In 1971, she was awarded one of England's highest honours and made a Dame Commander of the British Empire. She died in 1976, and is buried in the churchyard in Cholsey, Oxfordshire, near where she lived.

## Summary

A man called Ratchett is murdered on the Orient Express. He turns out to be a gangster known as Casseti, who killed three members of the same family (the Armstrongs) and one of their employees. A Belgian detective, Poirot, investigates. There are many confusing clues, but he eventually discovers that all the passengers and a conductor are in some way connected to the Armstrong family and twelve of them are guilty of the murder. Poirot decides not to tell the police, however, presumably because he believes they are justified in their actions.

**Chapter 1:** The Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, is travelling on a train to Istanbul. He hears a strange conversation between Miss Debenham, a cold, young woman and Colonel Arbuthnot. Poirot is called back to London urgently and tries to book a compartment on the Orient Express, but it is full. Fortunately, he meets M. Bouc, who works for the company and helps him get on the train. When Poirot is in the restaurant carriage, he is approached by an evil-looking man, Mr Ratchett, who says that someone has threatened to kill him. During the night, Poirot is woken by a cry, but it seems to be a false alarm. Then he hears a loud noise in the next-door compartment, but sees nothing strange in the corridor and goes back to sleep.

**Chapter 2:** The next day, the train is stuck in the snow and Bouc tells Poirot that Mr Ratchett has been found dead in his bed. He has been stabbed twelve times. The window is open but there are no footprints in the snow. Poirot interviews Ratchett's secretary, MacQueen, who tells him that Ratchett had received threatening letters. Dr Constantine tells Poirot that two wounds were made hours after Ratchett's death. Poirot discovers that Ratchett was really a gangster called Casseti, who had been involved in kidnapping and murdering an American child, the daughter of Colonel Armstrong and Armstrong's wife, the daughter of a famous actress, Linda Arden.

**Chapter 3:** Poirot interviews the conductor, Pierre Michel, and MacQueen again and they both tell him that they saw a woman dressed in a red dressing gown in the corridor. He then talks to Ratchett's manservant, Masterman, and Mrs Hubbard, an American woman, who is convinced that a man had been in her room the previous night. She had called the conductor, but when he arrived the man had disappeared. She has the compartment next to Ratchett's.

**Chapter 4:** Poirot interviews a Swedish lady, Greta Ohlsson, and then the conductor again. Poirot shows Michel a button that Mrs Hubbard found in her compartment, but he says it isn't his. Next, he talks to Princess Dragomiroff, who says Sonia Armstrong (the mother of the murdered child) was her goddaughter. Then, Poirot interviews Count and Countess Andrenyi, but they can tell him nothing. Colonel Arbuthnot tells Poirot that he saw that the door to compartment 16 was slightly open when he passed during the night and that a man had looked out secretly.



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**Chapter 5:** Poirot interviews the American man from compartment 16, a private detective called Hardman. Ratchett had hired him for protection and had told him that the person threatening him was a small, dark man with a high voice. An Italian called Foscarelli is interviewed next and then Miss Debenham, who also claims to have seen a tall woman wearing a red dressing gown the previous night. Finally, Poirot interviews Hildegard Schmidt, Princess Dragomiroff's maid. She tells him a small, dark conductor with a high voice woke her during the night. This description fits none of the conductors on the train.

**Chapter 6:** Mrs Hubbard finds the knife that was used to kill Ratchett in her sponge bag. Poirot begins searching the passengers' luggage and finds some pipe cleaners, identical to one found at the crime scene, in Colonel Arbuthnot's bag. Then he talks to Miss Debenham, who refuses to explain the strange conversation Poirot heard her have with Colonel Arbuthnot. Next, Poirot finds a conductor's uniform with a missing button in Hildegard Schmidt's compartment. When Poirot returns to his compartment for cigarettes, he finds the red dressing gown there.

**Chapter 7:** Poirot thinks about a handkerchief with an H on it which was found at the crime scene, and he remembers that Countess Andrenyi's passport had a recent ink mark on it. He suggests that maybe her name is Helena and not Elena as it seemed to be on the passport. Poirot starts to believe that the Countess is really Linda Arden's youngest daughter. He confronts her and she admits it, but her husband says he changed the name because he was afraid the police would suspect her as she had such a strong motive. Princess Dragomiroff approaches Poirot and says that the handkerchief is hers.

**Chapter 8:** Poirot discovers that Miss Debenham had been governess for the Armstrong family, Foscarelli was chauffeur to the family and Greta Ohlsson was the murdered child's nurse. Then, the manservant, Masterman, admits that he also worked for Colonel Armstrong. All the passengers are called to the restaurant carriage and Poirot explains two possible solutions to the mystery. Firstly, the murderer could be an enemy of Ratchett who dressed up as a conductor, killed him and then left the train. The second is that eleven of the twelve passengers and the conductor, Michel, are all guilty. Each one stabbed Ratchett once and none of them could really know who killed him. All of them had some relationship with the Armstrong family and wanted to take revenge for

what Ratchett had done. The second solution is the true one, but Poirot decides to tell the police that the first one is true.

### Background and themes

**Murder Mystery:** As in nearly all Agatha Christie's novels, the major theme is murder and its subsequent detection. There are often a large number of suspects, each with a motive, an opportunity or an alibi. Poirot embodies the clever detective, who cunningly sees through the lies of all those involved.

**Law and justice:** The insufficiency of the legal system is a key issue in this book. Ratchett, although a clearly evil man who is responsible for the deaths of four people, escapes justice and is acquitted of his crime. Those affected by this crime thus decide to take the law into their own hands. Twelve people are responsible for the murder, symbolically the same number of people that makes up a jury. Poirot significantly decides not to tell the police that they are guilty, thereby condoning their actions.

**Class:** As in all Christie's novels, the class structure is rigidly defined. There is a clear division on the train between the aristocratic and working-class passengers and the latter are often much weaker characters, often breaking down under pressure. The upper-class passengers appear to be much more in control.

### Discussion activities

#### Before reading

- 1 Research:** Ask students to find out information using books or the Internet about the Orient Express train. Guide them with these questions: *When did the first Orient Express run? Where did it go from and to? What was the train like? What could you eat? How is it different today? How has the Orient Express been important in books, film and television?* In class, put students in groups to share the information they have found and ask them to discuss whether they would like to go on the modern day Orient Express for a holiday.

#### Introduction

#### After reading

- 2 Pair work:** Ask students to answer the following questions: *How successful was Agatha Christie? What kind of education did she have? When did she start writing? What did she do during the war? Where did she get the idea of Poirot and Miss Marple from? What was her great interest? Why was she so successful? Where did she write 'Murder on the Orient Express'?*



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## Chapter 1

**While reading** (p. 1, after '... they became more friendly.')

- 3 Role play:** Put students in pairs. One of them is Miss Debenham and the other is Colonel Arbuthnot. Get them to discuss the kind of things they might talk about with regards to India and Baghdad and their common friends. Get feedback from the whole class and then get students to act out the conversation.

## After reading

- 4 Discuss:** Write the names of the following characters on the board: *Poirot, Colonel Arbuthnot, Miss Debenham, Bouc, Princess Dragomiroff, MacQueen, Ratchett, Mrs Hubbard*. Put students in small groups to discuss what they know about each one of them.

## Chapter 2

### After reading

- 5 Write and discuss:** Write MURDER on the board and put students in small groups to write a list of the names of all the crimes they know in English. Get feedback and write them on the board, adding some of your own. Now ask students to discuss the following questions: *Which of these crimes are most usual in your country? Why do people sometimes do these things? How serious are these crimes? How should we punish the people who do these things? Are these crimes becoming more or less usual? How can we stop them?*

## Chapter 3

**While reading** (p. 26, after '... and he didn't seem to believe me.')

- 6 Role play:** Put students in pairs to act out the conversation between Mrs Hubbard and the conductor. Mrs Hubbard explains that there has been a man in her room and the conductor tries to calm her down and say that it's not possible.

## Chapter 4

### After reading

- 7 Write and ask:** Write 'Why did Greta Ohlsson go to see Mrs Hubbard on the night of the murder?' on the board and elicit the answer (To ask her for some aspirin). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapter 4. Check their work as they do this. Now have students stand up and mingle, asking and answering each other's questions.

## Chapter 5

**While reading** (p. 38, after '... he showed me some threatening letters that he had received.')

- 8 Write:** Put students in pairs to discuss what kind of things it may have said in the letters. Then have them write one of the letters individually.

## After reading

- 9 Discuss:** Write the following nationalities on the board: BELGIAN, ENGLISH, AMERICAN, RUSSIAN, HUNGARIAN, FRENCH, SWEDISH, ITALIAN, GERMAN. Ask the students to say which characters in the book have these nationalities and check with the whole class. Now ask students to discuss in groups what they know about these countries and the way of life there. Encourage them to talk about stereotypes that are associated with each nationality and to assess to what extent they think these stereotypes are true. Students can then look back at the description of the characters of each nationality in the book to see if they fit these stereotypes or not.

## Chapter 6

### After reading

- 10 Pair work:** Write the following words on the board: *bolt, pipe cleaners, wet label, conductor's uniform, red dressing gown*. Put the students in pairs to discuss and write about how these words were significant in Chapter 6. Get feedback and then ask students to discuss how these things might help Poirot to solve the case.

## Chapter 7

### After reading

- 11 Write and guess:** Write 'MacQueen said that Ratchett spoke no languages except French.' on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (English not French). Now students choose a sentence from Chapter 7 and rewrite it changing one word. Students mingle, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

## Chapter 8

**While reading** (p. 61, after 'It is always better to be honest, Mademoiselle.')

- 12 Discuss:** Put students in small groups to discuss whether they think this statement (It is always better to be honest) is true. Encourage them to discuss on what occasions they lie.

## After reading

- 13 Research and write:** Ask students to do some research on the Internet into one of Agatha Christie's other books. Tell them to write a short summary of the plot. Then put students in groups to read out their summaries to each other. They then discuss if they would be interested in reading the book or not.

## Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).