Killing time with Agatha Christie

by Anthony Daniels

On revisiting the works of the British mystery writer.

Under virtual house arrest in Paris during the covid-19 epidemic, it occurred to me to write an essay on the transcendent meaning and value of crime novels. I happened to have three with me, and one of them was The Moving Finger by Agatha Christie, published in 1943, the year of Stalingrad and the apogee of the Final Solution.

I am a great admirer of Mrs. Christie. I enjoy her irony, and she sometimes reveals herself to be an acute psychologist. Quite apart from the pleasure she gives, reading her is not entirely a waste of time. She conveys to the reader the impression of enjoying the human comedy without bitterness or rancor, and thereby acts as an antidote to our resentment of the imperfections of the world and existence. There is also something deeply comforting about her fairy tales in which evil suddenly erupts into a pleasantly settled world only to be quickly defeated and for order to be restored. The world is not really like this, of course, and no one imagines that it is, but which of us never needs imaginative escape from reality?

I have several times considered writing essays about her work: for example, about the doctors in her books, the moral judgments and observations that she makes, and even one proposing that, in fact, both Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are serial killers, this being the hypothesis that most economically explains why there are so often murders wherever they go, it being the only hypothesis, indeed, that fulfills Occam’s Razor, namely that entities (such as murderers) are not to be increased unnecessarily.

The problem with such essays as I have contemplated is that they would require a great deal of work, and I very much doubt that the light would be worth the candle. In the process, I would have turned pleasure into work—work in the sense of being

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something onerous that one would rather not do, and having an alternative that one would enjoy
more. I would feel obliged to read her entire oeuvre in rapid succession so that my memory of it
did not decay, and the fact is that reading thousands of pages of any author is likely to sicken and
even disgust. A formative experience of my life was a lesson that one can have too much of a good
thing. I used to love rose- and violet-petal chocolate creams, and once bought a big bag of them to
eat in the theater. I finished them before the curtain went up and sat through the play—Ibsen, I
think it was—in a state of nausea. I expect that if I read too much Agatha Christie in succession, I
should experience the literary equivalent of that sensation. Not too much of a good thing: there must
be worse mottos for life.

It is the lack of realism that one appreciates in Agatha Christie. I have had more to do in my life
than most with murder and murderers, having been a prison doctor for a number of years, and the
sad fact is that most murders are extremely sordid and do not take place in the libraries of country
houses. Nor do they approximate the perfect crime that requires brilliant powers of deduction to
elucidate. From De Quincey to Leslie Stephen (Virginia Woolf’s father) and George Orwell, there
has been literary lamentation over the uninteresting quality of murders—I mean murders in the
real world, not in books—and I am afraid that these complaints were all justified. I rarely came
across a sophisticated murder; one was lucky if the murderer got as far as disposing of the murder
weapon down the drain a few yards from the scene of his crime. Not many interesting puzzles
there.

It must be admitted that The Moving Finger is not one of Agatha Christie’s finest works. On the
contrary, it is obviously a potboiler. Given the date of its publication, I imagine that it was
intended to lift the spirits of a population that was still under heavy bombardment with no victory
in sight. But no amount of admiration for the author can disguise the fact that this is a bad book,
even a very bad one. But a book does not entirely lack interest merely because it is bad, for every
book tells us something. Fortune favors the mind prepared, said Pasteur with regard to scientific
discovery; a mind must be prepared also to find things interesting.

The narrator of the story is an airman who has gone to a small country town with his sister to
recuperate after injury in an aircraft crash. It is left unsaid whether he was flying for pleasure or
against an enemy, and indeed it is not clear whether there is a war going on at all during the story.
This in itself must have been reassuring to the reader in 1943: that the war was not all-
compassing, all-embracing, all-conquering, and that ordinary life continued in parallel with it.
In like fashion, it comforts me to think and write about something other than the epidemic of covid-
19 that is raging as I write.

Another comforting aspect of the story is the seemingly unchanging social world in which it takes
place. It is a world in which there is a clear social hierarchy, and everyone not only knows, but is
also content with his place. The horrors of meritocracy, in which a subordinate position can be
attributed only to personal inadequacy, have not yet struck. There are still parlormaids in caps and
aprons who are happy in their work and who dream of marrying the butcher’s boy. They “walk
out” with him, but sex outside marriage is unthinkable because it would cause a scandal and local tongues would wag. Respectability, not transgression, is what confers social prestige. Hypocrisy is rampant as a result but is the price to pay for stability. And after all, if hypocrisy is the tribute that vice pays to virtue, it at least still appreciates that there is a difference between them.

A static, changeless world never existed, but after a certain age, at least, many of us like to imagine that it once did, by contrast with our restless, dissatisfied, jangling world in which nothing is solid, predictable, or lasting, and everything beautiful (we think) is in the process of being destroyed. Of course, such a vision will not appeal to those who do not believe that present mirth hath present laughter, and believe instead that what’s to come is sure to be better; when they turn to murder books, they want something grittier, more truthful to reality, and possibly even more sordid. If squalor be the root of crime, give me excess of it.

Into the life of the quiet, arcadian, and static little town where the airman of the story has gone to recuperate from his crash intrudes a writer of nasty anonymous letters, all of a sexual nature, for example claiming that the relations between the airman and his sister are not those of siblings only. The local lawyer’s clerk, Miss Ginch, “forty at least, with pince-nez and teeth like a rabbit,” is accused of an affair with her employer, the dry and seemingly unemotional Symmington (note how Christie is able to conjure up not only the appearance but the character of Miss Ginch in a mere ten words). Miss Ginch is so disturbed, or titillated, by the allegation that she changes jobs to remain above suspicion, though to nasty gossips her change of employment might indicate a guilty mind.

The local doctor lays out a typology of anonymous letter-writers, dividing them into two classes: those who target a particular person against whom they have a definite grudge, and the generalists, so to speak, those who work off some kind of frustration by sowing alarm and mistrust in an entire community.

Christie, whatever her defects, always knew what she was writing about.
was said to have been motivated by anger at the refusal of one of the villagers to sell her house to him (she sold it to another buyer), after which he took an obsessive interest in the peccadilloes of the villagers, which he carefully recorded in notebooks. But disappointment over a house sale as an explanation of his conduct is hardly better than no explanation at all. We are faced by the attraction to the human heart of evil for its own sake.

He desisted from his letter-writing after his release from prison, which proved either that he suffered no irresistible impulse to write them, or that he was cured of that impulse by his imprisonment. It is possible also that he considered his return to the village after imprisonment, living there for sixteen years until his death aged eighty-four, to have been a sufficient means of causing misery to his former victims and present neighbors.

The village in which Dr. Forster conducted his malicious campaign was widely described as a rural paradise, except for his activities. Here is Christie describing her country town through the words of her narrator: “It’s full of festering poison, this place, and it looks as peaceful and as innocent as the Garden of Eden.”

Did Christie know, or intuit, that at the very time she wrote her book untold thousands of anonymous denunciations to the police in Germany and Occupied France were being written, all for the most sordid or vicious reasons? The anonymous letter has always been a literary genre favored by amateurs, and it is a genre that awaits only its opportunity to flourish. Is this not what the social, or antisocial, media have given it? The extremity of insult, the menace implicit or explicit, the impossibility of knowing how seriously to take what is written in anonymous communications, all this must sow the seeds of neurosis in many a susceptible mind. (I hesitate to mention this, but there are websites that give instruction in how to write anonymous letters, as once there were manuals of how to write business correspondence.)

Even a bad Agatha Christie novel such as this contains observations that are shrewd and worth having. The doctor says of the letters: “I’m afraid . . . of the effect upon the slow, suspicious, uneducated mind. If they see a thing written, they believe it’s true.” This is highly pertinent in the age of the internet and declining educational standards.

I was startled to discover from reading this book that in 1943 the public was still permitted to buy cyanide for the purpose of killing wasps, which suggests that either there was no alternative available or that the government trusted the population a great deal more than it does now. (In this case, the trust was unjustified, because Symmington the lawyer poisons his wife with wasp-killer insinuated into her capsules of soporific, then making it look like suicide by putting cyanide in her bedside glass, she having been driven to it by the receipt of one of the anonymous letters.)

The speed with which the coroner conducts his inquests into suspicious deaths also surprises the contemporary reader. An inquest into Mrs. Symmington’s death is held within three days; nowadays it wouldn’t take place for eighteen months at the soonest, by which time all memories
of the events will have been expunged from the mind or made up. True, we are more thorough nowadays, in the sense of being more painstaking, but are we more accurate? I cannot help but suspect that our giant bureaucratic apparatus has done little overall for the administration of justice, at least if speed of administration is a necessary condition of justice in the abstract.

Despite the comforting apparent timelessness of the social dispensation depicted in *The Moving Finger*, the harbingers of change are nevertheless present. There is an incipient feminism in the book, on at least three occasions. For example, the doctor’s sister permits herself an outburst to the narrator:

> “You’re like all men—you dislike the idea of women competing. It is incredible to you that women should want a career. It was incredible to my parents. I was anxious to study for a doctor. They would not hear of paying the fees. But they paid them readily for [my brother]. Yet I should have made a better doctor than [he].”

The doctor’s sister is not an attractive character, any more than is Shylock, and yet her outburst is not without its rhetorical power.

There is also a depiction of the fateful reversal of sympathy by the educated upper-middle classes from the victim to the perpetrator of crime as a sign of superior sensibility. The vicar’s wife, Mrs. Dane Calthrop, says, “Poor thing, poor thing,” to the narrator after Mrs. Symmington’s death, only for us to realize that she is not referring to Mrs. Symmington. To whom is she referring, then?

> “Don’t you realise—can’t you feel? Use your imagination. Think how desperately, violently unhappy anyone must be to sit down and write these things. How lonely, how cut off from human kind. Poisoned through and through, with a dark stream of poison that finds its outlet in this way . . . that black inward unhappiness – like a septic arm physically, all black and swollen. If you could cut it and let the poison out it would flow away harmlessly. Yes, poor soul, poor soul.”

Mrs. Dane Calthrop’s reaction to crime in the country town is that which predominates, at least in today’s intellectual circles. Yet here it is gently and humorously, if effectively, satirized by Agatha Christie.

I persuade myself, then, that I have not entirely wasted my time while under house arrest by indulging a taste for crime fiction, even if one of the books I selected for the honor of being read was not of the highest quality, or one of the author’s best.

A last reflection: one of the characters in the book, a servant, has such a terrible apprehension of evil that she is put off her appetite for seed-cake. Can evil have worse effects than that? Happy the land where it cannot.
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