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Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks

Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making

Written by John Curran

Published by HarperCollins

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Agatha Christie's

SECRET NOTEBOOKS

*Fifty years of Mysteries
in the Making*

JOHN CURRAN



HarperCollinsPublishers

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AGATHA CHRISTIE'S SECRET NOTEBOOKS

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And, for various reasons, my thanks also to Eurion Brown, Pete Coleman, Julius Green, John Perry, John Ryan, John Timon, Andy Trott and Nigel Woollen.

Notes

I have ‘tidied up’ Agatha Christie’s notes as little as possible. Every page of every Notebook is littered with dashes, brackets and question marks; complete sentences are the exception rather than the rule. I have removed some capital letters, brackets and dashes, solely in the interests of legibility. In some cases I have amended a paragraph of words, broken only by dashes, into separate sentences. All remaining question marks, underlining, crossing-out, exclamation marks and dashes, as well as some grammatical errors, are as they appear in the Notebooks. If I have omitted text from within extracts I indicate this by the use of dots.

Spellings have not been corrected but marked as [sic].

Square brackets are used for editorial clarification or remarks.

Dates of publication refer to the UK edition. They have been taken, for the most part, from contemporary catalogues in Collins archives. Traditionally, Crime Club titles were published on the first Monday of the month and in the few instances where actual dates were not available, I have used this guideline.

I have reinstated the title *Ten Little Niggers*, rather than the more politically correct *And Then There Were None*, throughout. This accurately reflects both the Notebooks and the book as Agatha Christie first saw it in November 1939.

At the beginning of each chapter I have included a list of titles whose solutions are revealed within. It proved impossible to discuss a title intelligently or to compare it to the Notebooks unless I disclosed some endings, and in many cases the notes mention the vital name or plot device anyway. Christie's creative ruthlessness in deciding her killer is a vital part of her genius and to try circumventing this with ambiguous verbal gymnastics cannot do her justice.

In deciding which titles to include and which to omit, I intentionally avoided an alphabetical or a chronological listing. The former is meaningless in the context of this book and the latter resulted in all the classic titles appearing together in the middle years of Christie's career. I decided on a thematic arrangement, thereby incorporating variety and simultaneously illustrating Christie's exploitation of a motif. The grouping of titles within categories is somewhat arbitrary. Some titles might fit under a few headings, e.g. *A Caribbean Mystery* could appear in either 'A Holiday for Murder' or 'Murder Abroad'; *Five Little Pigs* could fit neatly into 'The Nursery Rhyme Murders' and 'Murder in Retrospect'. I selected and arranged them with an eye to variety and balance.

Relatively few short stories have detailed notes. I have chosen those with sufficient notes to make their inclusion worthwhile.

It is not possible in a book of this size to mention every title and if your favourite is missing I apologise; I hope to remedy this situation in a subsequent and expanded edition.

It is important for readers to note that the Notebooks are not available for viewing. It is hoped in a few years to be able to grant limited access to them but at present this is not possible.

Foreword

MATHEW PRICHARD

Quite a few years ago, my first wife, Angela, and I made a trip to Calgary in western Canada to see a world premiere of a very early Agatha Christie play called *Chimneys*. At the first reception we met a quiet, bespectacled Irishman called John Curran. He took with his customary good humour my opening gambit that he must be mad to travel from Dublin to Calgary to see an Agatha Christie play and we have been friends ever since.

After my parents died at Greenway in Devon, which has recently been taken over by the National Trust (and has just been reopened), John was a frequent visitor. Most people who visit Greenway are transfixed by the gardens and the walks by the river. Not John. He spent all his time in the ‘fax room’, a room on the first floor about ten feet by four in which the Agatha Christie archive was kept. He had to be prised out for meals, sometimes spending 12 hours a day immersed in the history of Agatha Christie’s work.

It was here that John’s love affair with Agatha Christie’s Notebooks blossomed, and neither he nor I could believe our (and your) good fortune when HarperCollins agreed to publish John’s book after them. I think you will find that his fascination and enthusiasm for them emerge very clearly and,

as a bonus, he has included two very rare Agatha Christie short stories.

I never cease to be astounded that over 30 years since she died, interest in every aspect of Agatha Christie's life and work is still at fever pitch. To John's credit, he has always concentrated on her work, leaving to others more morbid fascination about the person behind the books, and here is a book which deals with the very kernel, the raw material of all this great work. It is highly personal and certainly a piece of literary history. John has produced a treat for us all – I hope you enjoy it.

MATHEW PRICHARD

PREFACE

Shadows in Sunlight – Interlude at Greenway, Summer 1954

As she watches the river below, a pleasure steamer chugs towards Dartmouth, sun glinting on the water in its wake. The laughter of the holidaymakers on board reaches her vantage point in the Battery, and the dog at her feet raises his head peering inquisitively towards the river. A drowsy bee is the only other sound that disturbs her peace. Elsewhere in this haven the gardener, Frank, is busy preparing for the flower show and Mathew is following the treasure hunt she set for him, but here in this semi-circular battlement at the edge of the garden overlooking the river she has peace. And a temporary solitude to think about her next project after a wonderful period of leisure – eating the glorious produce of the garden and swimming in the sea and picnicking on the nearby moors and lazing on the lawn and enjoying the company of her family and friends.

She knows that if she lets her mind wander inspiration will come; after all, for over 35 years her imagination has never let her down and there is no reason to suppose that in this tranquil setting it will fail her. She gazes vaguely around. Just visible to her left is the roof of the Boathouse, and behind and to the right the garden continues its upward climb towards the imposing Georgian house. She can now hear

occasional rustles in the undergrowth as Mathew follows her trail of clues.

If he has followed them properly he should, by now, be heading in the direction of the tennis court . . . Wonder if he'll spot the tennis ball . . . it has the next clue. Very like a detective story really . . . but more fun and less planning . . . and no editing or proofreading . . . and nobody writes to you afterwards and points out mistakes . . . But if there were a few participants it would be even better – more fun and more of a contest. Perhaps next time I could arrange for some of Max's nephews to join him and that would make it more exciting. Or the next time I have a garden party for the local school . . . maybe I could work in the Battery and the Boathouse . . . although the Boathouse could seem slightly sinister . . . especially if you were there on your own . . .

She is now gazing unseeingly over the river and imagining her surroundings in a more ominous light . . .

If the lawn was a scene of light-hearted enjoyment . . . a family event . . . no, it would need more people than that . . . a garden party . . . a fund-raiser? For the Scouts or the Guides – they were always in need of funds . . . yes, possibilities there . . . There could be stalls on the lawn and teas in a tent, perhaps by the magnolia . . . people in and out of the house . . . a fortune-teller and a bottle stall . . . and confusion about where everyone was . . . And elsewhere in the grounds a darker force at work . . . unrecognised . . . unsuspected . . . What about here in the Battery? No – too open and . . . too . . . too . . . unmenacing, and you couldn't really hide a body here; but the Boathouse . . . now, that has possibilities – far enough away to be lonely, down those rickety steps, and yet perfectly accessible to anyone. And you can lock the door . . . and it can be reached from the river . . .

PREFACE

What about Mrs Oliver? . . . perfect for planning a treasure hunt . . . and it could go wrong for some reason and somebody dies. Let's see . . . how about a murder hunt instead of a treasure hunt . . . like Cluedo except around a real house and grounds instead of a board. Now, Poirot or Marple . . . Marple or Poirot . . . can't see Miss M walking around Greenway, bad enough for Poirot but not really credible that she would . . . and she doesn't know Mrs Oliver anyway, and I have to use her . . . So . . . Mrs O would have to bring in Poirot for some reason . . . perhaps she could call him down to the house on some pretext . . . she needs his help with some of the clues? . . . or could he know the Chief Constable . . . but I've used that a few times already . . . how about handing out the prize for the winner of the hunt . . .

She reaches into her bag and extracts a large red notebook . . .

Not really suitable for carrying around but to use the Scouts' own motto – be prepared. Now, I'm sure there's a pen here somewhere . . . Best to get this down while it is still fresh – it can be changed later but I think the basic idea has distinct possibilities.

She opens the notebook, finds an empty page and starts to write.

Basic ideas usable

Mrs Oliver summons Poirot

She is at Greenway – professional job – arranging a Treasure Hunt or a Murder Hunt for the Conservation Fete, which is to be held there –

She is totally absorbed, covering the pages with characteristically large, sprawling handwriting, getting ideas down on paper even if they are to be discarded at a later stage. The real

Greenway has disappeared as she peoples it with the children of her imagination: foreign students, girl guides, boy scouts, murder hunt solvers, policemen – and Hercule Poirot.

Some ideas

Hiker (girl?) from hostel Next door – really Lady Bannerman

Yes, the youth hostel next door could be put to some good use . . . foreign students . . . possibilities of disguising one of them as . . . who? They're always coming and going and nobody knows who they are – they could be anyone, really. A girl is easier to disguise than a man . . . perhaps she could double as the lady of the house. Mmmmm, that would mean nobody really knowing her well . . . perhaps she could be ill . . . an invalid . . . always in her room . . . or stupid and nobody pays attention to her . . . or recently married and new to everyone. But then someone from her past arrives . . . her real husband, maybe . . . or a lover . . . or a relative . . . and she has to get rid of them . . .

Young wife recognised by someone who knows she is married already – blackmail?

I can adapt one of the treasure hunts I've done for Mathew and work in the Boathouse somehow . . . and invent Mrs Oliver's hunt . . . I could use the Cluedo idea of weapons and suspects . . . but with a real body instead of a pretend one . . .

Mrs Oliver's plan

The Weapons

Revolver – Knife – Clothes Line

Who will I murder? The foreign student . . . no, she has to be part of the plan . . . someone very unexpected then . . . how about the lord of the manor? . . . no, too clichéd . . . needs to have impact . .

PREFACE

. what about a stranger? . . . but who . . . and that brings a lot of problems . . . I'll leave that for next year maybe . . . How about a child? . . . needs to be handled carefully but I could make it a not-very-nice child . . . perhaps the pretend body, could be one of the scouts, turns out to be really dead . . . or, better again, a girl guide . . . she could be nosy and have seen something she shouldn't . . . Don't think I've had a child victim before . . .

Points to be decided – Who first chosen for victim?
(?a) 'Body' to be Boy Scout in boat house – key of which has to be found by 'clues'

She gazes abstractedly into the distance, blind to the panoramic view of the river and the wooded hillside opposite. She is Poirot, taking afternoon tea in the drawing room, carefully exiting through the French windows and wandering down through the garden. She is Hattie, intent on preserving her position and money at all costs. She is Mrs Oliver, distractedly plotting, discarding, amending, changing . . .

Next bits – P at house – wandering up to Folly – Finds?

Hattie goes in as herself – she changes her clothes and emerges (from boathouse? Folly? fortune teller's tent?) as student from Hostel

Now, I have to provide a few family members . . . how about an elderly mother . . . she could live in the Gate Lodge. If I make her mysterious, readers will think she is 'it' . . . little old ladies are always good as suspects. Could she know something from years earlier? . . . perhaps she knew Hattie from somewhere . . . or thinks she does . . . or make Poirot think she does, which is almost as good . . . Let's see . . .

Mrs Folliat? suspicious character – really covering up for something she saw. Or an old crime – a wife who ‘ran away’

She stops writing and listens as a voice approaches the Battery calling ‘Nima, Nima.’

‘Here, Mathew,’ she calls and a tousled 12-year-old runs down the steps.

‘I found the treasure, I found the treasure,’ he chants excitedly, clutching a half-crown.

‘Well done. I hope it wasn’t too difficult?’

‘Not really. The clue in the tennis court took me a while but then I spotted the ball at the base of the net.’

‘I thought that one would puzzle you,’ she smiles.

She closes the notebook and puts it away in her bag. Hercule Poirot’s questioning of Mrs Folliat and the identity of a possible second victim will have to wait.

‘Come on,’ she says. ‘Let’s see if there is anything nice to eat in the house.’

Agatha Christie, Queen of Crime, is finished for the day and Agatha Christie, grandmother, climbs the steps from the Battery in search of ice-cream for her grandson.

And the Christie for Christmas 1956 was *Dead Man’s Folly*.