

Searching for Christie

by Carolyn Hart

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Agatha Christie was among the world's most retiring authors. She rarely gave interviews, dreaded public appearances. If we were to have the good fortune to walk beside her in an English garden, how we would find our companion?

Those who knew her personally agree that she was shy, observant, an accomplished musician, a faithful friend, disciplined, self-conscious about her lack of a formal education, brave, well-read in the Victorian sense, familiar with the classics, with Shakespeare, with the Bible. .

But looking beyond one-line descriptions, what was this remarkable woman like as a person?

Essayists and critics have often bemoaned the lack of public utterances by this reclusive author.

Christie's autobiography concentrates on her childhood, in which she recalls in loving detail a most protected youth. Janet Morgan's excellent biography is, nonetheless, the picture presented by an adoring family. Throughout these writings there is a clear reserve, a dignified restraint.

In today's vulgar society, a successful biography is often a compounding of surmise about an individual's most private thoughts and actions. In reality,

neither the psychobabble kind of biography nor the restrained remarks of intimates provide readers with a true picture of personality.

Is it sadly true, then, that we who read her detective fiction, admiring her genius with plotting, her cleverness in dissembling, and her brilliance with character are doomed never really to know her?

No. What mattered to Agatha Christie, her attitudes, and her passions can easily be found. Read her books again. This time, read not for plot or character, not for pleasure or intellectual stimulation, but read as an ornithologist watches for a rare, hard-to-sight quarry. Read for the author's heart.

Christie's heart is in her books, speaking to us through her characters, just as clearly and forthrightly as she would speak could she walk into her drawing room and greet a friend. Every writer reveals in print the stamp of his soul. The qualities an author admires, the emotions that rule an author's heart are there for the finding.

Here are comments made by characters in various Christie novels which present a clear picture of Dame Agatha:

Anne Beddingfield in *The Man in the Brown Suit*: "I had the firm conviction that, if I went about looking for adventure, adventure would meet me halfway. It is a theory of mine that one always gets what one wants."

The young nurse in *Towards Zero* speaking to the would-be suicide bitter at being saved: "It may be just by being somewhere – not doing anything – oh, I can't say what I mean, but you might just – just walk along a street someday and just by doing that accomplish something terribly important – perhaps without even knowing what it was."

Virginia Revel in *the Secret of Chimneys*: "It's just as exciting to buy a new experience as it is to buy a new dress – more so, in fact."

John Christow in *The Hollow* speaking to his lover, Henrietta, a sculptor: "If I were dead, the first thing you'd do, with tears streaming down your face, would be to start modeling some damned mourning woman or some figure of grief . . ."

Ariadne Oliver in *Mrs. McGinty's Dead* commenting on the misery of having a book adapted to the stage: ". . . you've no idea of the agony of having your characters taken and made to say things that they never would have said and do things they never would have done."

Maureen Summerhayes in *Mrs. McGinty's Dead*: "I never think it matters much what one eats . . . or what one wears . . . or what one does. I don't think things matter – not really."

Miss Marple in "The Bloodstained Pavement": "There is a great deal of wickedness in village life. I hope you dear young people never realize how very wicked the world is."

Hester Argyle in *Ordeal by Innocence*: "It's not the guilty who matter. It's the innocent."

Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd*: "Children feel things, you know. They feel things more than the people around them ever imagine."

Mrs. Crabtree in *The Hollow* to Henrietta Savernake, mourning the loss of her lover: "Don't fret, ducky – what's gorn's gorn. You can't 'ave it back."

Parker Pyne in "The Case of the Middle-aged Wife": "A woman tears a passion to pieces and gets no good from it, but a romance can be laid up in lavender and looked at all through the long years to come."

Miss Marple in *The Body in the Library*: "The truth is, you see, that most people – and I don't exclude policemen – are far too trusting for this wicked world. They believe what is told to them. I never do. I'm afraid I always like to prove a thing for myself."

Agatha Christie is there, in the insouciance of Tuppence, in the determination of Poirot, in so many laughing quips and telling comments. Read her books once again and catch glimpses of that most elusive, most reclusive author. Read for her heart – it's there to find.