



AGATHA CHRISTIE

Queen of Crime

by Margot Morrell

ACCORDING TO THE GUINNESS BOOK
OF WORLD RECORDS, AGATHA CHRISTIE:

- Wrote seventy-eight books and nineteen plays.
- Has sold over 2 billion copies. Exceeded only by the Bible and Shakespeare.
- Has been published in forty-four languages.
- Authored the world's longest-running play, *The Mousetrap*, which opened November 25, 1952.



Agatha Miller was born at Torquay, a winter resort on England's south coast, in 1890. Her bright, lively sister, Madge, 11 years older, was a wonderful role model; her brother, Monty, was 10 years older.



Agatha wrote in her autobiography, "One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is, I think, to have a happy childhood."

But when she was six, her once well-to-do family began to have financial difficulties. Her father died suddenly when she was eleven.

Agatha and her father at their beloved home, Ashfield.



In 1901, 11-year-old Agatha published a poem in a newspaper when trams invaded her grandmother's leafy, London suburb.

"When first the electric trams did run
In all their scarlet glory,
'Twas well, but ere the day was done,
It was another story. ..."

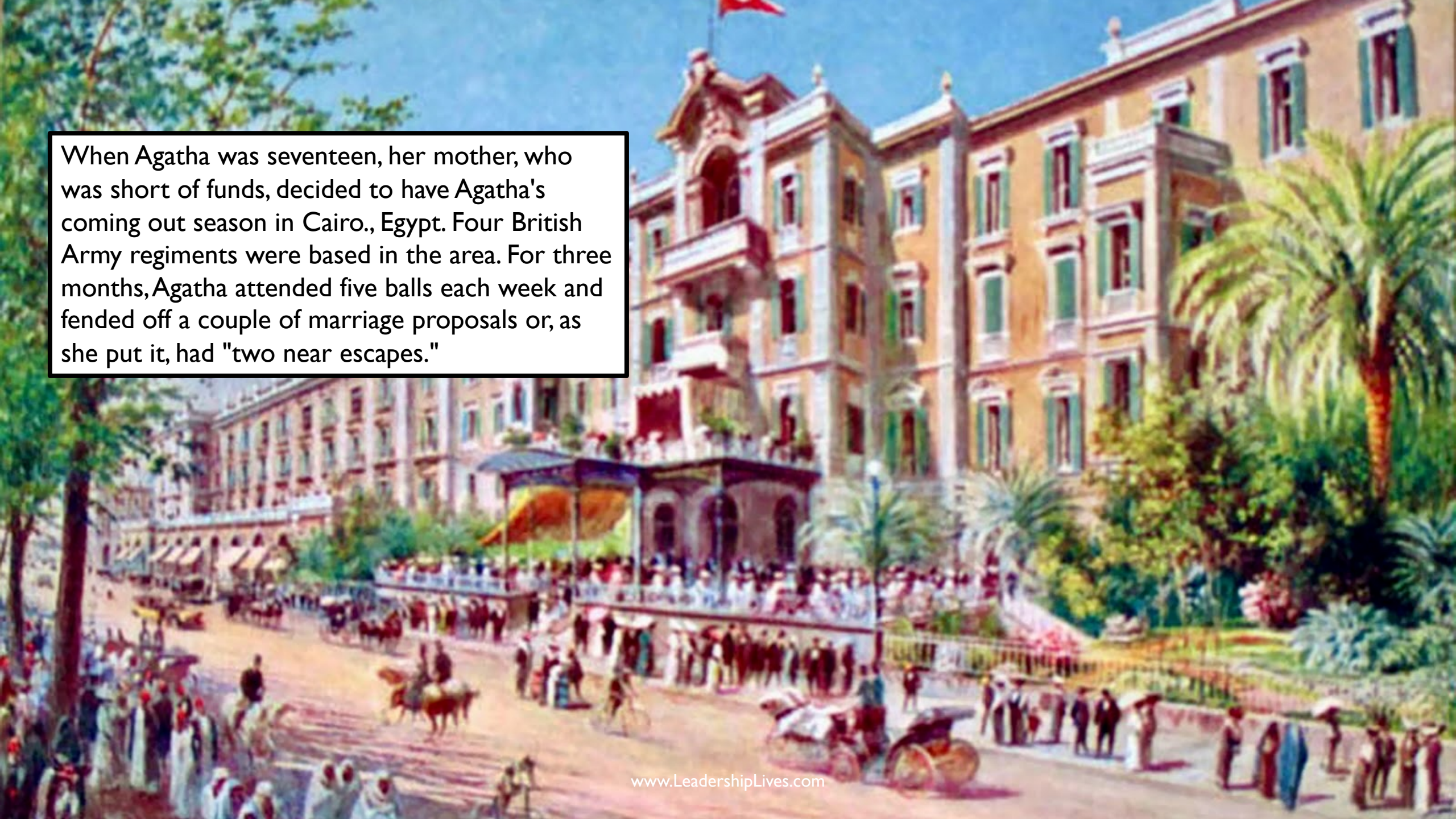
As a teenager, Agatha studied singing and piano in Paris and London. She had the talent to be a concert singer but was too shy – a quality that remained with her throughout her life.

Instead, she decided to focus on writing and began submitting poems to *The Poetry Review*. She was thrilled to win an occasional prize.

Paris ca. 1906



When Agatha was seventeen, her mother, who was short of funds, decided to have Agatha's coming out season in Cairo., Egypt. Four British Army regiments were based in the area. For three months, Agatha attended five balls each week and fended off a couple of marriage proposals or, as she put it, had "two near escapes."





Her sister, Madge, married a year after their father died. When Madge visited Ashfield or when Agatha visited Madge's rambling home, Abney Hall, five hours north of Torquay, Madge told Agatha stories and introduced her to Sherlock Holmes. The sisters shared a passion for mysteries.

Before Madge married, she wrote stories that were published in posh *Vanity Fair*, and a couple of unproduced plays. Their father took great pride in Madge's accomplishments.

Agatha said, "There is no doubt that Madge was the talented member of our family."



Sometime after 1907, when the French bestseller, *The Mystery in the Yellow Room*, was published, Madge and Agatha got into a spirited discussion that set Agatha on the path to extraordinary success.

Their conversation led to an informal bet about writing a detective novel. Madge said, "'I don't think you could do it. They are very difficult to do. I've thought about it.' Agatha said, 'I should like to try.' 'Well, I bet you couldn't, said Madge.'"

Years later, Agatha wrote, "The seed had been sown."

Madge, ca. 1900

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A few years later, while Agatha was recovering from the flu, her mother suggested she write a story, "like Madge."

Mrs. Miller dug out a notebook and Madge's old Empire typewriter and Agatha began writing stories and submitting them to magazines under various pen names.



Agatha wrote in her autobiography, "The stories all returned promptly with the usual slip: 'The Editor regrets . . .' Then I would parcel them up again and send them off to some other magazine."

Eventually, she decided to attempt a novel based on her months in Egypt and gave her book the unlikely title, *Snow in the Desert*. She said, "I embarked lightheartedly."

Agatha, ca. 1910



When she ran into plot problems with her novice effort, her mother suggested she ask their neighbor, best-selling author Eden Philpotts, for "help or advice."

Forty years later, Agatha wrote, "I can hardly express the gratitude I feel to him. He could so easily have uttered a few careless words of well-justified criticism, and possibly discouraged me for life. As it was, he set out to help."

Philpotts put his thoughts in writing, "Some of the things that you have written are capital. You have a good feeling for dialogue. ..." He gave Agatha a letter of introduction to his literary agent, Hughes Massie, for further assistance.

Agatha visited Massie in his London office. A few months later the agent returned the manuscript to her saying he didn't think he could place it.

In the years following her debut, Agatha had more flirtations and one "understanding." Then, in the fall of 1912, Agatha met handsome Archie Christie at a dance and fell in love.

He soon proposed but her mother pointed out neither of them had any money to live on. For a year and a half, Agatha and Archie saw each other when possible but not very often.

In December 1914, as World War I spread through Europe, Archie insisted they get married. After a three-day honeymoon, Archie returned to his Royal Flying Corps squadron.



Two years earlier, with no sense of impending war, Agatha had signed up for a training program as a nurse's aide.

In 1915, she transferred to work as a pharmacist. Her new-found expertise in drugs and poisons flung open a door to an unlikely new career.

There were times that the pharmacy was busy but there were also quiet hours of solitude. Agatha had lots of time to think. She decided to write a detective story.

Agatha Miller at Ashfield, 1914, the year she married Archie Christie.





Agatha wrote in *An Autobiography*...

"It was while I was working in the dispensary that I first conceived the idea of writing a detective story. The idea had remained in my mind since Madge's earlier challenge - and my present work seemed to offer a favorable opportunity. Unlike nursing, where there always was something to do, dispensing consisted of slack or busy periods. Sometimes I would be on duty alone in the afternoon with hardly anything to do but sit about. Having seen that the stock bottles were full and attended to, one was at liberty to do anything one pleased except leave the dispensary."

"I began considering what kind of a detective story I could write. Since I was surrounded by poisons, perhaps it was natural that death by poisoning should be the method I selected. I toyed with the idea and finally accepted it. Then I went on to the dramatis personae. Who should be poisoned? Who would poison him or her? When? Where? How? Why? All the rest of it. It would have to be very much of an intimate murder, owing to the particular way it was done; it would have to be all in the family, so to speak."

Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*



1915-era Pharmacy



David Suchet as Hercule Poirot

"Who could I have as a detective?... He would be meticulous, very tidy... I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be very brainy - he should have little grey cells of the mind - that was a good phrase ... He would have rather a grand name...

In leisure moments, bits of my detective story rattled about in my mind."

Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*



In the summer of 1916, when progress stalled about halfway through, her mother suggested she use her two-weeks of vacation time to concentrate on finishing her book.

The Moorland Hotel

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It was an excellent suggestion. Agatha booked a room at The Moorland Hotel perched on the edge of open countryside. The solitude, fresh air and exercise were the perfect combination for pushing the project forward. She returned home with a completed, albeit somewhat messy first draft.

Dartmoor

A person is holding an open book, and the pages are visible. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is overlaid on the book, containing text. The background is dark and out of focus.

After polishing her manuscript, she sent it off to Hodder and Stoughton. They returned it with a "plain refusal." Over the next two years, Agatha sent her manuscript, titled *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, to five more publishers.



The next two years were tumultuous – Archie was transferred to the Air Ministry in London, Agatha scrambled to find a place for them to live, the war ended, Archie returned to civilian life, and, in August 1919, their daughter, Rosalind was born.

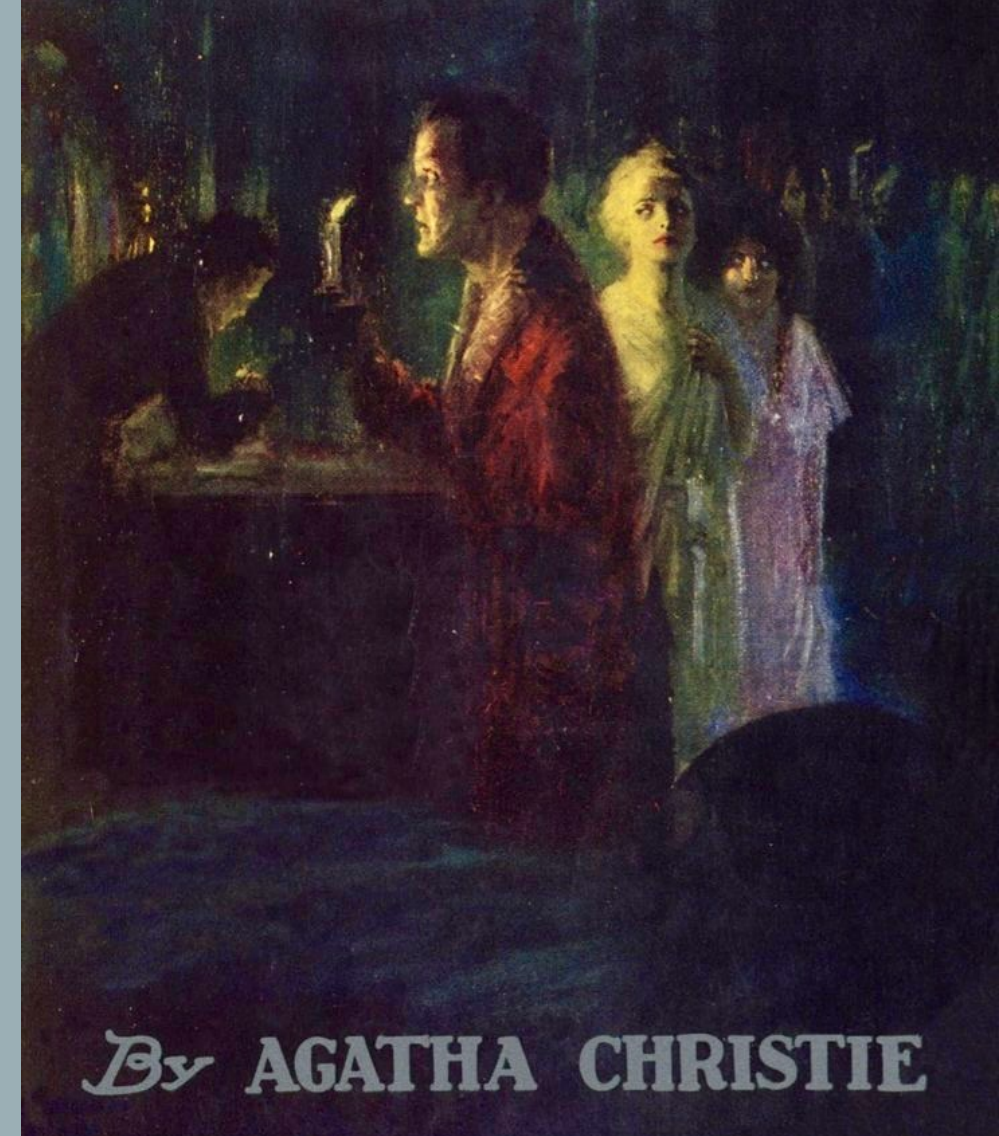
Almost two years after Christie submitted her manuscript for the sixth time to a London publisher, she got a letter. "I opened it quite casually and read it without at first taking it in. It was from John Lane, The Bodley Head and it asked if I would call at their office in connection with the manuscript I had submitted entitled *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*." After she made some suggested changes, Lane offered her a contract.

"This particular contract entailed my not receiving any royalties until after the first 2000 copies had been sold - after that a small royalty would be paid. Half any serial or dramatic rights would go to the publisher. ...

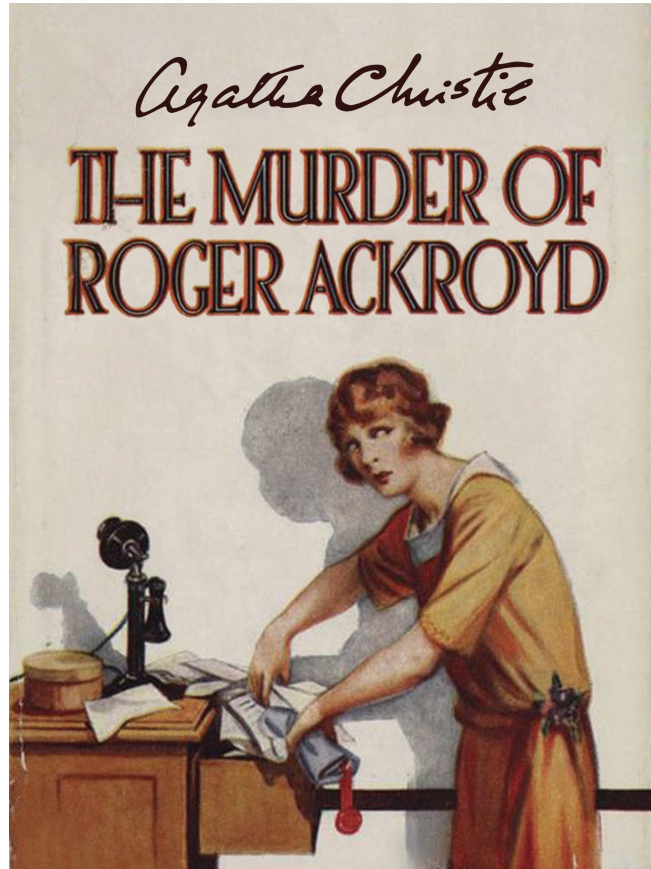
I didn't even notice that there was a clause binding me to offer him my next five novels, at an only slightly increased rate of royalty. ..."

Five years later, when their contract was fulfilled, feeling badly used, Christie refused to re-sign with The Bodley Head.

THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT STYLES



By AGATHA CHRISTIE



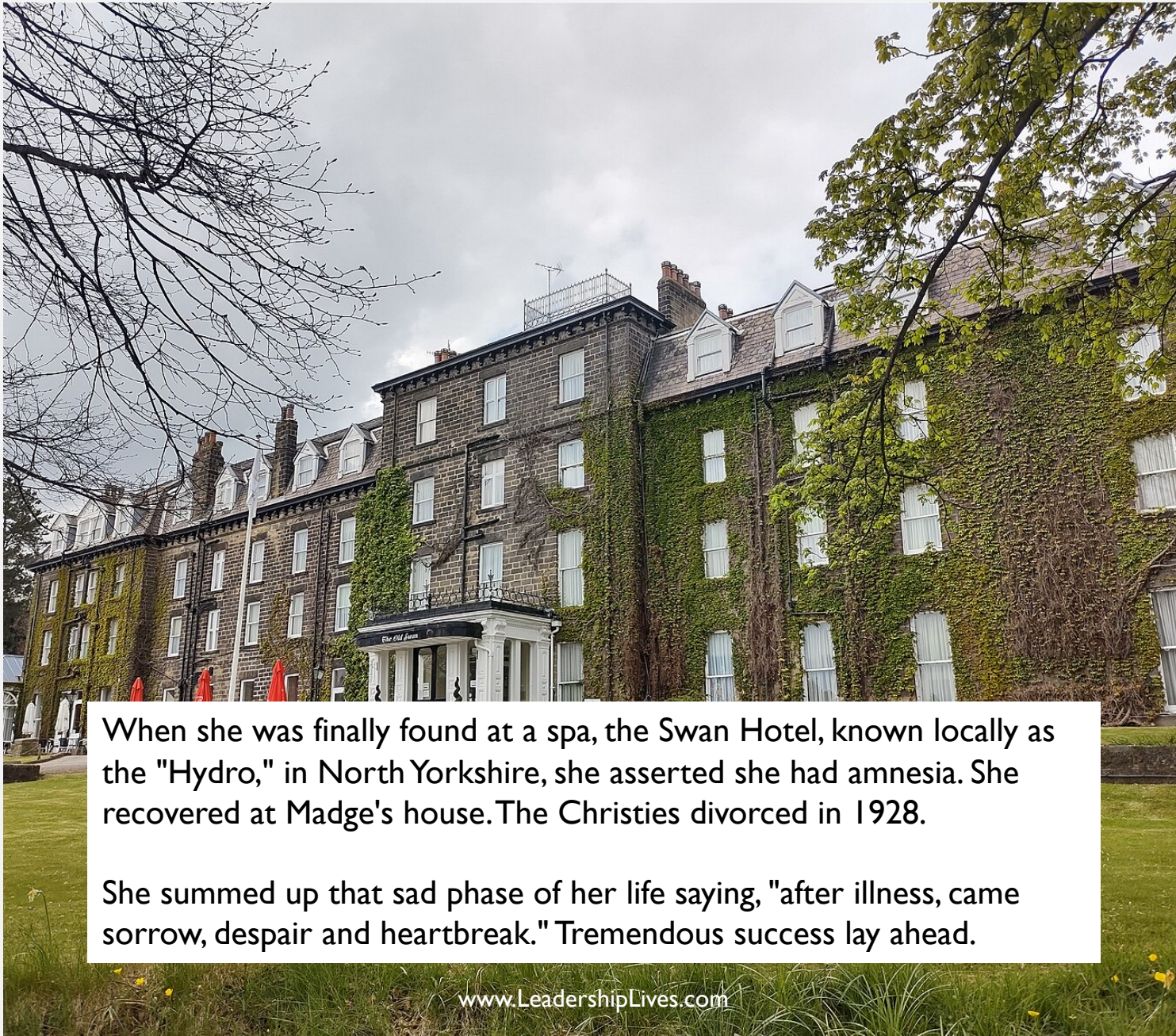
She reconnected with Hughes Massie's literary agency and signed with agent, Edmund Cork who introduced her to William Collins & Sons (now Harper Collins). She remained with Cork and with William Collins for the rest of her career.

Her first book, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, published with the new team in 1926 struck gold for the author, agent and publisher. She credited Madge's husband and Lord Mountbatten for suggesting the plot twist.

Agatha's breakthrough bestseller received glowing reviews in the UK and overseas.

But that same year, in a matter of months, her beloved mother died, she spent months cleaning out Ashfield, and Archie demanded a divorce. She was overwhelmed.

For 10 days in December, she disappeared. Hundreds of volunteers gathered to search for Mrs. Christie.



When she was finally found at a spa, the Swan Hotel, known locally as the "Hydro," in North Yorkshire, she asserted she had amnesia. She recovered at Madge's house. The Christies divorced in 1928.

She summed up that sad phase of her life saying, "after illness, came sorrow, despair and heartbreak." Tremendous success lay ahead.

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AT HARROGATE

**Dramatic Re-union With Husband
in Famous Hydro.**

"HER MEMORY GONE"

**How Missing Novelist Spent Time While
Police and Public Looked for Her**

Mrs. Christie, the missing inventor of detective stories, was traced last night to the Hydro, Harrogate, by her husband, Colonel Christie.

In an interview after a dramatic meeting between the pair, Colonel Christie told the DAILY HERALD that his wife had suffered from the "most complete loss of memory." She did not even recognise him, he added.



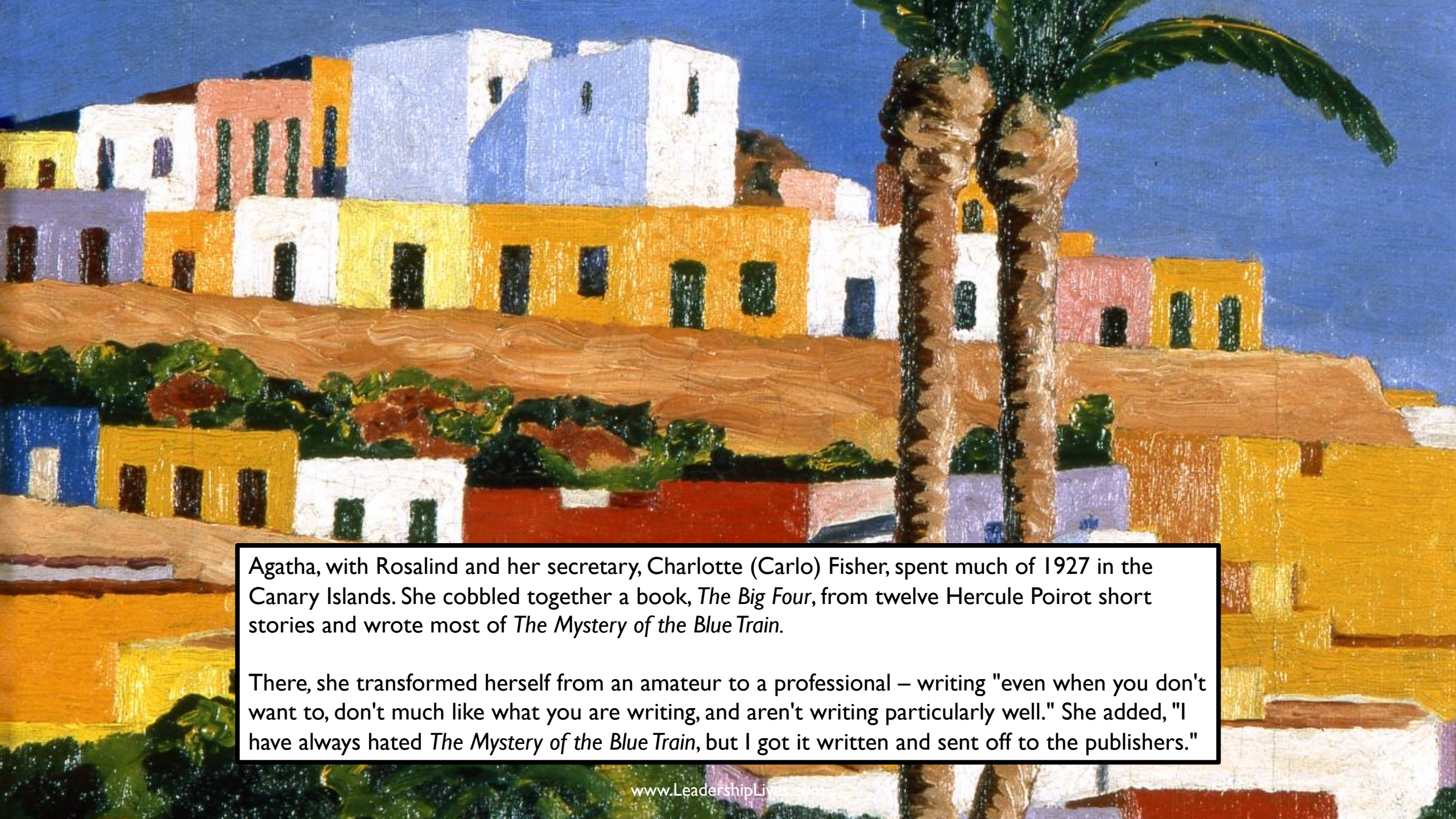
Mrs. Christie

***"She does not
know why she
is here."***

—Col. Christie



Col. Christie



Agatha, with Rosalind and her secretary, Charlotte (Carlo) Fisher, spent much of 1927 in the Canary Islands. She cobbled together a book, *The Big Four*, from twelve Hercule Poirot short stories and wrote most of *The Mystery of the Blue Train*.

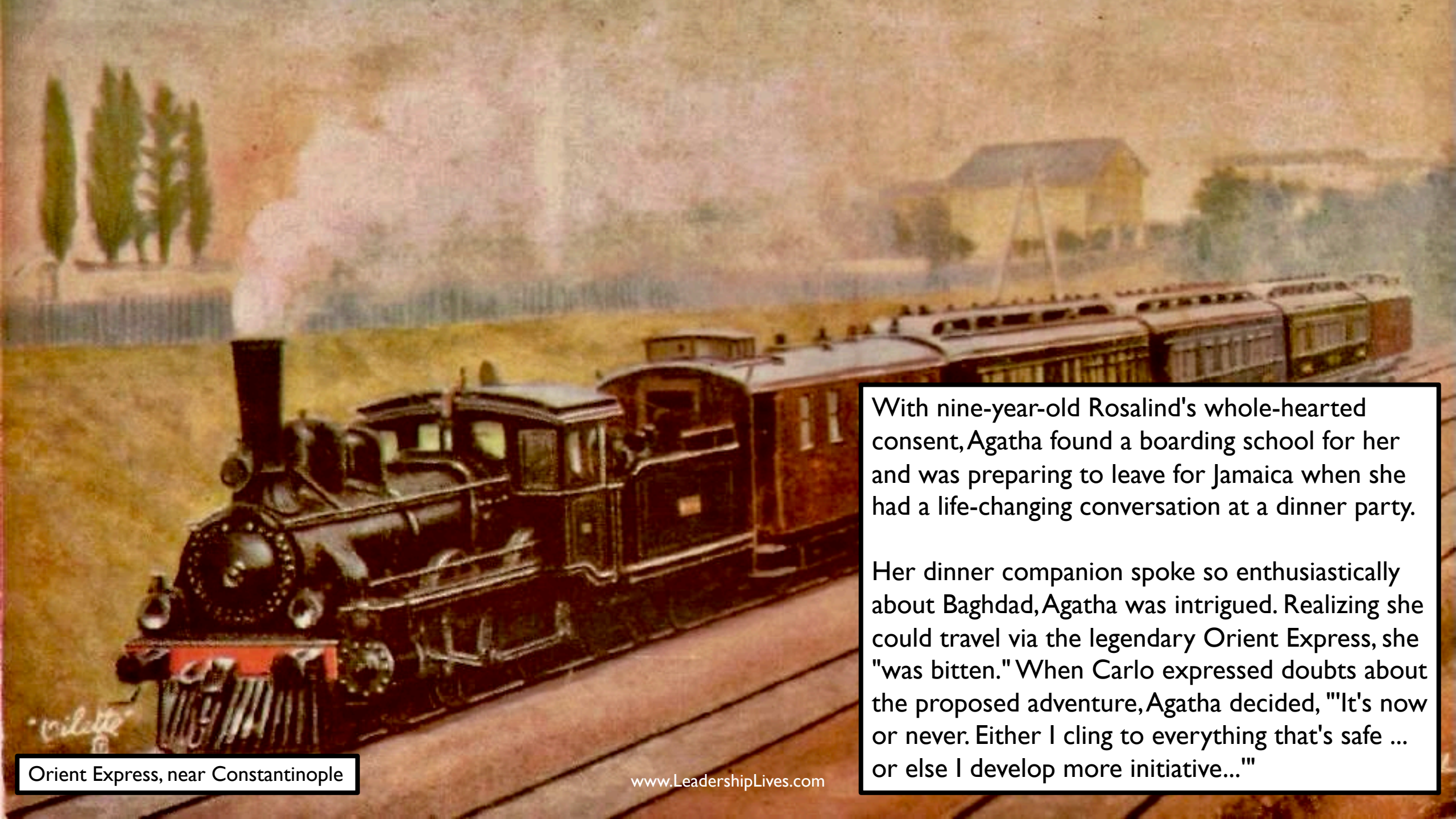
There, she transformed herself from an amateur to a professional – writing "even when you don't want to, don't much like what you are writing, and aren't writing particularly well." She added, "I have always hated *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, but I got it written and sent off to the publishers."



In December 1927, Agatha introduced another memorable character, Miss Jane Marple, to the world in a short story, "The Tuesday Night Club" published in *The Royal Magazine*.

Loosely inspired by her grandmother and her grandmother's friends, Agatha's Miss Marple was "though a cheerful person, she always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and was, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right."

Miss Marple initially came into being as a character named Caroline Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. When director Gerald du Maurier cut the role of Caroline from the stage version of the book, Miss Marple sprang into life in Agatha's mind.

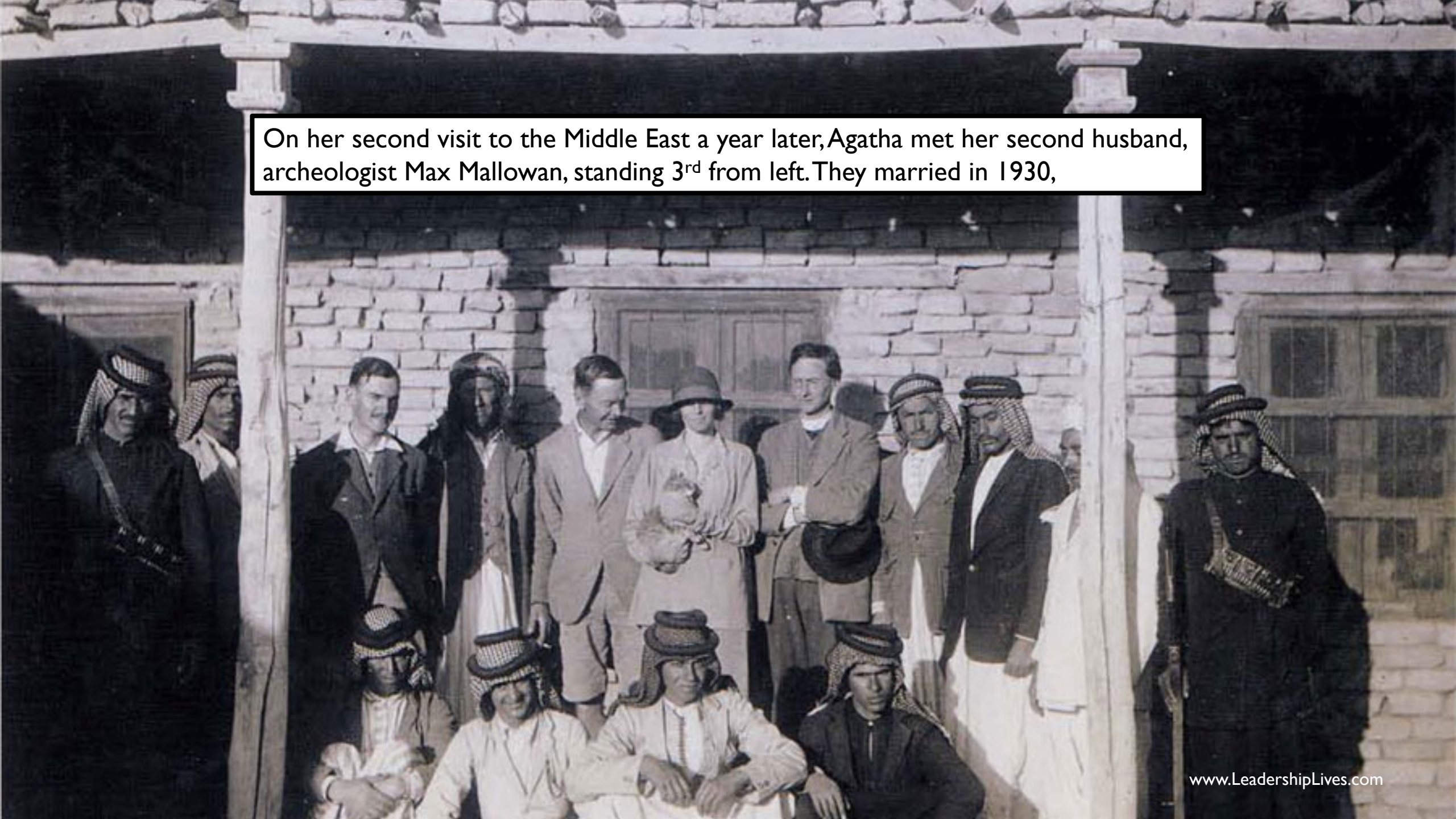


With nine-year-old Rosalind's whole-hearted consent, Agatha found a boarding school for her and was preparing to leave for Jamaica when she had a life-changing conversation at a dinner party.

Her dinner companion spoke so enthusiastically about Baghdad, Agatha was intrigued. Realizing she could travel via the legendary Orient Express, she "was bitten." When Carlo expressed doubts about the proposed adventure, Agatha decided, "It's now or never. Either I cling to everything that's safe ... or else I develop more initiative..."

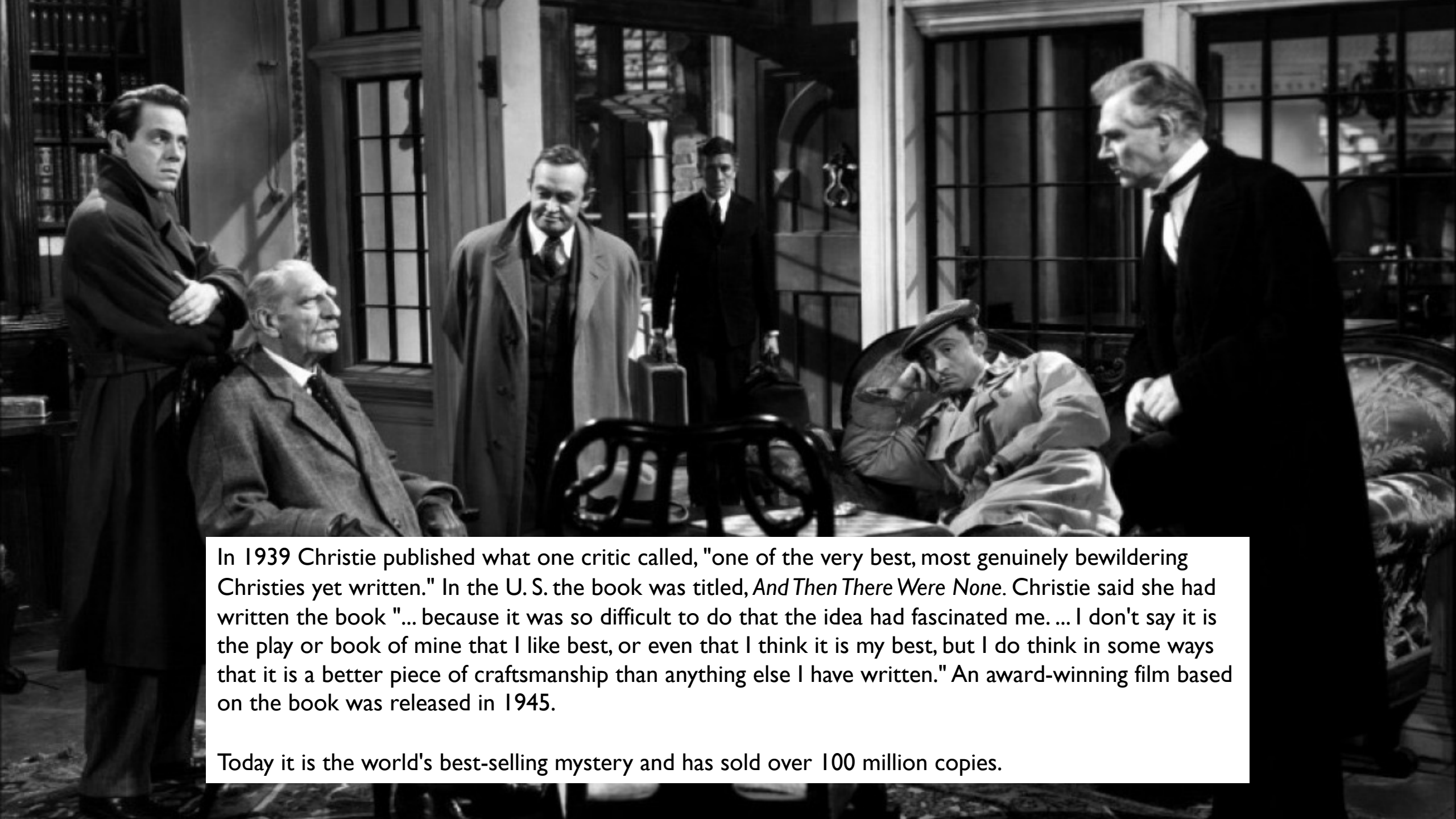
Orient Express, near Constantinople

On her second visit to the Middle East a year later, Agatha met her second husband, archeologist Max Mallowan, standing 3rd from left. They married in 1930,



Agatha and Max settled into a happy home life. They spent winter months on archeological digs in the Middle East. While Max dug, Agatha turned out a "Christie for Christmas."





In 1939 Christie published what one critic called, "one of the very best, most genuinely bewildering Christies yet written." In the U. S. the book was titled, *And Then There Were None*. Christie said she had written the book "... because it was so difficult to do that the idea had fascinated me. ... I don't say it is the play or book of mine that I like best, or even that I think it is my best, but I do think in some ways that it is a better piece of craftsmanship than anything else I have written." An award-winning film based on the book was released in 1945.

Today it is the world's best-selling mystery and has sold over 100 million copies.

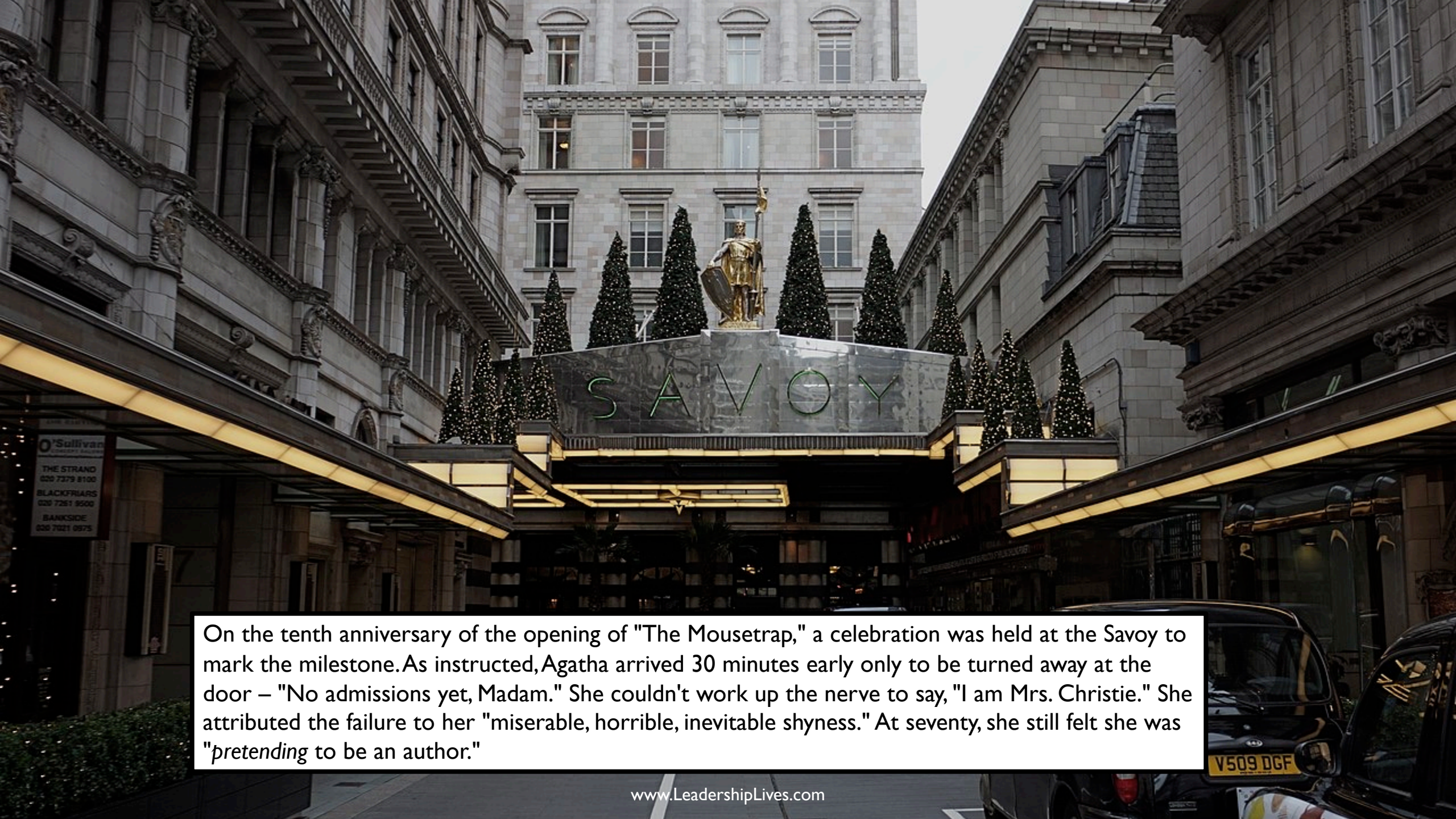


In a 1955 radio interview, Christie said, "I do find one's friends are curious about the way one works. "What is your method?" they want to know. The disappointing truth is that I haven't much method. I type my own drafts on an ancient faithful machine I've owned for years, and I find a Dictaphone useful for short stories or for recasting an act of a play...

I think the real work is done in thinking out the development of your story, and worrying about it, until it comes right. That may take quite a while."



In November 25, 1952, her play, "The Mousetrap" opened in London. Agatha expected the play to run for eight months.



On the tenth anniversary of the opening of "The Mousetrap," a celebration was held at the Savoy to mark the milestone. As instructed, Agatha arrived 30 minutes early only to be turned away at the door – "No admissions yet, Madam." She couldn't work up the nerve to say, "I am Mrs. Christie." She attributed the failure to her "miserable, horrible, inevitable shyness." At seventy, she still felt she was "pretending to be an author."



"What can I say at 75?
'Thank God for my good
life, and for all the love that
has been given to me.'"

Agatha Christie,
An Autobiography



AGATHA CHRISTIE'S FAVORITE BOOKS:
(Christie wrote this list in 1972.)

And Then There Were None, 1939

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, 1926

A Murder is Announced, 1950

Murder on the Orient Express, 1934

The Thirteen Problems (Miss Marple: The Complete Short Stories), 1932

Towards Zero, 1944

Endless Night, 1967

Crooked House, 1949

Ordeal by Innocence, 1958

The Moving Finger, 1943

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IMAGE CREDITS

AGATHA CHRISTIE WITH HER BOOKS. HARPER COLLINS PUBLICITY STILL.

TORQUAY, CA. 1890. RETRIEVED FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2002708169/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2002708169/).

AGATHA MILLER WITH HER FATHER, FREDERICK ALVAH MILLER. THE CHRISTIE ARCHIVE TRUST, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

AGATHA MILLER, 1894. DOUGLAS JOHN CONNAH, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

AGATHA MILLER IN PARIS, 1906. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

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AGATHA MILLER, CA. 1910. THE CHRISTIE ARCHIVE TRUST, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS. (LEANING OUT A WINDOW.)

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DAVID SUCHET AS HERCULE POIROT. PUBLICITY STILL.

THE MOORLAND HOTEL, HAY TOR. PAM FRAY, CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION-SHARE ALIKE 2.0 GENERIC.

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AGATHA CHRISTIE WITH HER DAUGHTER ROSALIND, 1923. THE CHRISTIE ARCHIVE TRUST, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

AGATHA CHRISTIE WITH ARCHIE CHRISTIE, AFTER HE RECEIVED THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE, 1919. PUBLIC DOMAIN.

THE MYSTERIOUS AFFAIR AT STYLES, ORIGINAL DUSTJACKET. JOHN LANE, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

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OLD SWAN HOTEL. JOONIUR, CC BY-SA 4.0, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

MRS. CHRISTIE AT HARROGATE. DAILY HERALD (LONDON) 15 DECEMBER 1926, P. 1., PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

CLIFF. CANARY ISLANDS SPAIN, BY JOSE JORGE ORAMAS, (1932) RETRIEVED FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2021670660/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2021670660/).

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MAX MALLOWAN AND EXPEDITION HOUSE-AND-STAFF AT UR, 1928 - 1929. PUBLIC DOMAIN,VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

AGATHA CHRISTIE AND MAX MALLOWAN AT THEIR WINTERBROOK HOUSE, 1950. NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON, PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

AND THEN THERE WERE NONE. FILM SCREENSHOT (20TH CENTURY FOX), PUBLIC DOMAIN, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

LISSEN LN8109 RADIO, UK, AROUND 1935. ELECTROMECHANIC812291, CC BY 2.0, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

70TH YEAR OF "THE MOUSETRAP" AT ST. MARTIN'S THEATRE, LONDON, 2022. GOOGLE MAPS, SCREENSHOT.

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