

Where Murder is Planned

Our Authors at Home. Agatha Christie, ace of crime writers and exclusively published by Collins over a period of 20 years, plans murder amidst the peaceful surroundings of her Devonshire home, overlooking the River Dart.

AGATHA CHRISTIE, daughter of an English mother and an American father, lives today in a house overlooking the spot from which the *Mayflower* sailed. The house itself, Greenway House, belonged in Elizabethan times to Sir Humphrey Gilbert, step-brother of Sir Walter Raleigh, who sailed from this coast to take possession of Newfoundland in Queen Elizabeth's name. During the late war the house was occupied by United States Navy personnel, who commemorated its Anglo-American associations by painting frescoes on the sitting-room walls depicting the exploits of the U.S. Navy flotillas. Now the Americans have gone and Agatha Christie and her archaeologist husband are left to enjoy the peaceful surroundings of their beautiful home and to plan—he, further digging expeditions; she, more and better murders!

Agatha Christie was born in Torquay. A friend of the family was the Devonshire playwright, Eden Phillpotts, who early encouraged her to try writing as a career. During World War I she nursed as a V.A.D., becoming a qualified dispenser; fortunately for her patients' peace

of mind, she had not yet started out on her career of crime! That began with *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, her first novel written towards the end of the war, but not published till 1920. In it she created the famous little Belgian detective with the egg-shaped head and the impressive moustaches, Hercule Poirot, destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes. But neither the author, the book, nor the detective created any sensation at the time, and it was not until 1926, after averaging a steady book a year, that Agatha Christie wrote what is still regarded as her masterpiece, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. That was, too, the first of her books to be published by Collins, who have remained her publishers ever since. It was also the first of several of her books to be dramatised and to have a successful West End run. Charles Laughton played the part of Poirot, one of his first leading parts in the London theatre.

In 1930 Agatha Christie was one of the first authors to be published in the newly established Crime Club series, of which she has been the key support ever since;



Agatha Christie at home. *Left*—In her study correcting proofs of her latest book. *Centre*—With her husband she enjoys a bathe in the summer-time she enjoys a bathe. *Right*—In the library, now decorated with frescoes painted by U.S. Navy personnel during their war-time stay at Greenway House.



Agatha Christie and her husband, Max Mallowan, on the heather-covered slopes above Greenway House. In the background is the village of Dittisham, from which the *Mayflower* sailed.

no fewer than 27 of her books have been Selections, including her latest, *The Hollow*, which is the Book of the Month for November, 1946.

In the same year, 1930, Agatha Christie became Mrs. Max Mallowan. She met the distinguished archaeologist at Ur, in Iraq, while he was engaged on an expedition with Leonard Woolley. She has since accompanied him on several expeditions, and from them have come the ideas and settings for four of her books—*Death on the Nile*, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Appointment with Death*, and *Death Comes as the End*. She is making a departure from fiction in a book called *Come, Tell Me How You Live* in which, under the name of Agatha Christie Mallowan, she gives us an informal and witty description of how you live when digging up the Past in the Middle East. During the recent war, her husband served first in the Air Ministry and later as adviser on Arab affairs to the British Government in Tripolitania, while she resumed her dispensing at University College Hospital.

For the rest, we cannot do better than quote Maurice Richardson writing recently on "The Queen of Crime" in *Picture Post* :—"The secret of Agatha Christie's method, whereby she achieves a consistently high pitch of suspense, so that her readers can count on the solution being a real surprise and not an anti-climax, is her deft

manipulation of suspects. Like an expert juggler, she can keep as many as six in the air at the same time.

"There is more than metaphorical sleight-of-hand about this process. Agatha Christie is a past mistress at the art of bamboozling the reader, and putting him off the scent by means of copious red herrings. Her methods have been called 'unfair.' The fact is that a good many million readers all over the world simply don't care how unfair she is to them. They'll be in at the kill every time, hot but happy after chasing endless false trails.

"In addition to her peculiar brand of ingenuity, Agatha Christie possesses that indispensable quality for any entertainer—charm. In her detective stories it comes across in the form of smooth, easy readability. Interest is caught right away and lured irresistibly on towards the centre of the web. Her charm is not confined to her work. She is tall, rather broad, good-looking, smartly dressed, sophisticated without being affected, with a sense of humour. She takes a keen interest in food, doesn't drink or smoke, likes swimming, loves music, but is violently allergic to the B.B.C.

"Aged around fifty, with a grown-up daughter, she gives you the impression, according to one of her admirers, of being native to Belgravia and brought up on a good golf course."