

Agatha Christie

ELEPHANTS CAN REMEMBER



Elephants Can Remember

Agatha Christie is known throughout the world as the Queen of Crime. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English with another billion in 100 foreign languages. She is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. She is the author of 80 crime novels and short story collections, 19 plays, and six novels written under the name of Mary Westmacott.

Agatha Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was written towards the end of the First World War, in which she served as a VAD. In it she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective who was destined to become the most popular detective in crime fiction since Sherlock Holmes. It was eventually published by The Bodley Head in 1920.

In 1926, after averaging a book a year, Agatha Christie wrote her masterpiece. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was the first of her books to be published by Collins and marked the beginning of an author-publisher relationship which lasted for 50 years and well over 70 books. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was also the first of Agatha Christie's books to be dramatised – under the name *Alibi* – and to have a successful run in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, her most famous play of all, opened in 1952 and is the longest-running play in history.

Agatha Christie was made a Dame in 1971. She died in 1976, since when a number of books have been published posthumously: the bestselling novel *Sleeping Murder* appeared later that year, followed by her autobiography and the short story collections *Miss Marple's Final Cases*, *Problem at Pollensa Bay* and *While the Light Lasts*. In 1998 *Black Coffee* was the first of her plays to be novelised by another author, Charles Osborne.

The Agatha Christie Collection

The Man In The Brown Suit
The Secret of Chimneys
The Seven Dials Mystery
The Mysterious Mr Quin
The Sittaford Mystery
The Hound of Death
The Listerdale Mystery
Why Didn't They Ask Evans?
Parker Pyne Investigates
Murder Is Easy
And Then There Were None
Towards Zero
Death Comes as the End
Sparkling Cyanide
Crooked House
They Came to Baghdad
Destination Unknown
Spider's Web *
The Unexpected Guest *
Ordeal by Innocence
The Pale Horse
Endless Night
Passenger To Frankfurt
Problem at Pollensa Bay
While the Light Lasts

Poirot

The Mysterious Affair at Styles
The Murder on the Links
Poirot Investigates
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd
The Big Four
The Mystery of the Blue Train
Black Coffee *
Peril at End House
Lord Edgware Dies
Murder on the Orient Express
Three-Act Tragedy
Death in the Clouds
The ABC Murders
Murder in Mesopotamia
Cards on the Table
Murder in the Mews
Dumb Witness
Death on the Nile
Appointment With Death
Hercule Poirot's Christmas
~~Sad Cypress~~
One, Two, Buckle My Shoe
Evil Under the Sun
Five Little Pigs

* novelised by Charles Osborne

The Hollow
The Labours of Hercules
Taken at the Flood
Mrs McGinty's Dead
After the Funeral
Hickory Dickory Dock
Dead Man's Folly
Cat Among the Pigeons
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding
The Clocks
Third Girl
Hallowe'en Party
Elephants Can Remember
Poirot's Early Cases
Curtain: Poirot's Last Case

Marple

The Murder at the Vicarage
The Thirteen Problems
The Body in the Library
The Moving Finger
A Murder is Announced
They Do It With Mirrors
A Pocket Full of Rye
The 4.50 from Paddington
The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side
A Caribbean Mystery
At Bertram's Hotel
Nemesis
Sleeping Murder
Miss Marple's Final Cases

Tommy & Tuppence

The Secret Adversary
Partners in Crime
N or M?
By the Pricking of My Thumbs
Postern of Fate

Published as Mary Westmacott

Giant's Bread
Unfinished Portrait
Absent in the Spring
The Rose and the Yew Tree
A Daughter's a Daughter
The Burden

Memoirs

An Autobiography
Come, Tell Me How You Live

Play Collections

The Mousetrap and Selected Plays
Witness for the Prosecution and
Selected Plays

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**Elephants
Can Remember**

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To Molly Myers
in return for many kindnesses

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Chapter 1

A Literary Luncheon

Mrs Oliver looked at herself in the glass. She gave a brief, sideways look towards the clock on the mantelpiece, which she had some idea was twenty minutes slow. Then she resumed her study of her coiffure. The trouble with Mrs Oliver was – and she admitted it freely – that her styles of hairdressing were always being changed. She had tried almost everything in turn. A severe pompadour at one time, then a wind-swept style where you brushed back your locks to display an intellectual brow, at least she hoped the brow was intellectual. She had tried tightly arranged curls, she had tried a kind of artistic disarray. She had to admit that it did not matter very much today what her type of hairdressing was, because today she was going to do what she very seldom did, wear a hat.

On the top shelf of Mrs Oliver's wardrobe there

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reposed four hats. One was definitely allotted to weddings. When you went to a wedding, a hat was a 'must'. But even then Mrs Oliver kept two. One, in a round bandbox, was of feathers. It fitted closely to the head and stood up very well to sudden squalls of rain if they should overtake one unexpectedly as one passed from a car to the interior of the sacred edifice, or as so often nowadays, a registrar's office.

The other, and more elaborate, hat was definitely for attending a wedding held on a Saturday afternoon in summer. It had flowers and chiffon and a covering of yellow net attached with mimosa.

The other two hats on the shelf were of a more all-purpose character. One was what Mrs Oliver called her 'country house hat', made of tan felt suitable for wearing with tweeds of almost any pattern, with a becoming brim that you could turn up or turn down.

Mrs Oliver had a cashmere pullover for warmth and a thin pullover for hot days, either of which was suitable in colour to go with this. However, though the pullovers were frequently worn, the hat was practically never worn. Because, really, why put on a hat just to go to the country and have a meal with your friends?

~~The fourth hat was the most expensive of the lot and it had extraordinarily durable advantages about it. Possibly, Mrs Oliver sometimes thought, because it was so expensive. It consisted of a kind of turban~~

of various layers of contrasting velvets, all of rather becoming pastel shades which would go with anything.

Mrs Oliver paused in doubt and then called for assistance.

'Maria,' she said, then louder, 'Maria. Come here a minute.'

Maria came. She was used to being asked to give advice on what Mrs Oliver was thinking of wearing.

'Going to wear your lovely smart hat, are you?' said Maria.

'Yes,' said Mrs Oliver. 'I wanted to know whether you think it looks best this way or the other way round.'

Maria stood back and took a look.

'Well, that's back to front you're wearing it now, isn't it?'

'Yes, I know,' said Mrs Oliver. 'I know that quite well. But I thought somehow it looked better that way.'

'Oh, why should it?' said Maria.

'Well, it's meant, I suppose. But it's got to be meant by me as well as the shop that sold it,' said Mrs Oliver.

'Why do you think it's better the wrong way round?'

'Because you get that lovely shade of blue and the dark brown, and I think that looks better than the other way which is green with the red and the chocolate colour.'

At this point Mrs Oliver removed the hat, put it

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on again and tried it wrong way round, right way round and sideways, which both she and Maria disapproved of.

‘You can’t have it the wide way. I mean, it’s wrong for your face, isn’t it? It’d be wrong for anyone’s face.’

‘No. That won’t do. I think I’ll have it the right way round, after all.’

‘Well, I think it’s safer always,’ said Maria.

Mrs Oliver took off the hat. Maria assisted her to put on a well cut, thin woollen dress of a delicate puce colour, and helped her to adjust the hat.

‘You look ever so smart,’ said Maria.

That was what Mrs Oliver liked so much about Maria. If given the least excuse for saying so, she always approved and gave praise.

‘Going to make a speech at the luncheon, are you?’ Maria asked.

‘A speech!’ Mrs Oliver sounded horrified. ‘No, of course not. You know I never make speeches.’

‘Well, I thought they always did at these here literary luncheons. That’s what you’re going to, isn’t it? Famous writers of 1973 – or whichever year it is we’ve got to now.’

‘I don’t need to make a speech,’ said Mrs Oliver.

‘Several other people who *like* doing it will be making speeches, and they are much better at it than I would be.’

'I'm sure you'd make a lovely speech if you put your mind to it,' said Maria, adjusting herself to the rôle of a tempter.

'No, I shouldn't,' said Mrs Oliver. 'I know what I can do and I know what I can't. I can't make speeches. I get all worried and nervy and I should probably stammer or say the same thing twice. I should not only feel silly, I should probably look silly. Now it's all right with words. You can write words down or speak them into a machine or dictate them. I can do things with words so long as I know it's not a speech I'm making.'

'Oh well. I hope everything'll go all right. But I'm sure it will. Quite a grand luncheon, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Oliver, in a deeply depressed voice. 'Quite a grand luncheon.'

And why, she thought, but did not say, why on earth am I going to it? She searched her mind for a bit because she always really liked knowing what she was going to do instead of doing it first and wondering why she had done it afterwards.

'I suppose,' she said, again to herself and not to Maria, who had had to return rather hurriedly to the kitchen, summoned by a smell of overflowing jam which she happened to have on the stove, 'I wanted to see what it felt like. I'm always being asked to literary lunches or something like that and I never go.'

★ ★ ★

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Mrs Oliver arrived at the last course of the grand luncheon with a sigh of satisfaction as she toyed with the remains of the meringue on her plate. She was particularly fond of meringues and it was a delicious last course in a very delicious luncheon. Nevertheless, when one reached middle age, one had to be careful with meringues. One's teeth? They looked all right, they had the great advantage that they could not ache, they were white and quite agreeable-looking – just like the real thing. But it was true enough that they were *not* real teeth. And teeth that were not real teeth – or so Mrs Oliver believed – were not really of high class material. Dogs, she had always understood, had teeth of real ivory, but human beings had teeth merely of bone. Or, she supposed, if they were false teeth, of plastic. Anyway, the point was that you mustn't get involved in some rather shame-making appearance, which false teeth might lead you into. Lettuce was a difficulty, and salted almonds, and such things as chocolates with hard centres, clinging caramels and the delicious stickiness and adherence of meringues. With a sigh of satisfaction, she dealt with the final mouthful. It had been a good lunch, a very good lunch.

Mrs Oliver was fond of her creature comforts. She ~~had enjoyed~~ the luncheon very much. She had enjoyed the company, too. The luncheon, which had been given to celebrated female writers, had fortunately

not been confined to female writers only. There had been other writers, and critics, and those who read books as well as those who wrote them. Mrs Oliver had sat between two very charming members of the male sex. Edwin Aubyn, whose poetry she always enjoyed, an extremely entertaining person who had had various entertaining experiences in his tours abroad, and various literary and personal adventures. Also he was interested in restaurants and food and they had talked very happily about food, and left the subject of literature aside.

Sir Wesley Kent, on her other side, had also been an agreeable luncheon companion. He had said very nice things about her books, and had had the tact to say things that did not make her feel embarrassed, which many people could do almost without trying. He had mentioned one or two reasons why he had liked one or other of her books, and they had been the right reasons, and therefore Mrs Oliver had thought favourably of him for that reason. Praise from men, Mrs Oliver thought to herself, is always acceptable. It was women who gushed. Some of the things that women wrote to her! Really! Not always women, of course. Sometimes emotional young men from very far away countries. Only last week she had received a fan letter beginning 'Reading your book, I feel what a noble woman you must be.' After reading *The Second*

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Goldfish he had then gone off into an intense kind of literary ecstasy which was, Mrs Oliver felt, completely unfitting. She was not unduly modest. She thought the detective stories she wrote were quite good of their kind. Some were not so good and some were much better than others. But there was no reason, so far as she could see, to make anyone think that she was a noble woman. She was a lucky woman who had established a happy knack of writing what quite a lot of people wanted to read. Wonderful luck that was, Mrs Oliver thought to herself.

Well, all things considered, she had got through this ordeal very well. She had quite enjoyed herself, talked to some nice people. Now they were moving to where coffee was being handed round and where you could change partners and chat with other people. This was the moment of danger, as Mrs Oliver knew well. This was now where other women would come and attack her. Attack her with fulsome praise, and where she always felt lamentably inefficient at giving the right answers because there weren't really any right answers that you could give. It went really rather like a travel book for going abroad with the right phrases.

Question: 'I ~~must~~ tell you how very fond I am of reading your books and how wonderful I think they are.'

Answer from flustered author, 'Well, that's very kind. I am so glad.'