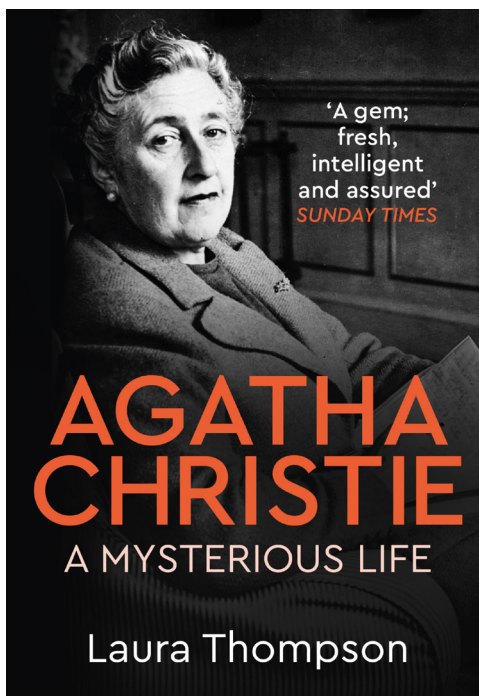




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Solving the Agatha Christie mystery

by AMIT ROY

AGATHA CHRISTIE wrote many murder mysteries, but there remains one in her own life – why the “Queen of Crime” disappeared for 11 days between December 3 and 14 in 1926?

Had she taken her own life or possibly even been murdered? Hundreds of police and members of the public were involved in searching for the author after her car was found by a canal. There was fevered speculation in the newspapers as the nation was gripped by the mystery of the missing writer.

To this day, there is no definitive answer, but in *Agatha Christie: A Mysterious Life* (Headline; £12.99) her biographer Laura Thompson has concluded the author suffered a nervous breakdown. She was found in a hotel in Harrogate, apparently suffering from loss of memory. But significantly, she had booked in partly using the name of her husband's mistress.

“That episode is the whole heart of the book because it's such an extraordinary event,” says Thompson, who has written a remarkable book about a remarkable woman, cleverly linking passages from Agatha's novels to real events in her life.

To be sure, it is known that Agatha was devastated when her husband, Colonel Archibald Christie, told her he wanted a divorce because he had fallen in love with Nancy Neele, a younger woman.

Thompson's book is an updated version of the biography first brought out in 2007. But 2020 is special because it marks 100 years since Agatha introduced the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, in her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

One of Thompson's best sources was Agatha's daughter, Rosalind, who was only seven when her mother disappeared but who, after her parents' divorce in 1928 after 14 years of marriage, managed to maintain good relations with her father.

As part of her research, Thompson not only spoke to Rosalind but also retraced Agatha's steps during those 11 days.

Thompson gives the background leading to Agatha's breakdown. The author was already in a state of shock because of the death of her mother to whom she had been very close.

“It was August 1926,” says Thompson. “Archie came down to (their holiday home in) Torquay for Rosalind's birthday. A couple of days later she knew something was up, she thought he might be ill. And then he said to her, ‘Look, I'm in love with this girl and I want a divorce.’”

“Between August and December, he didn't leave her as such. They were still

in a way together in (their home in) Sunningdale (in Surrey). She tried to make him go on holiday with her, and he refused. She was still hoping he would stay. I don't think she believed even then he would leave.

“And then when it came to December 3, I think she just had enough. They were meant to go away that weekend. He didn't turn up at the house. She left a letter for him whose contents are unknown, but I would imagine he destroyed it. She must have been coming up to snapping at that point. He just kept asking for a divorce, which she refused to give him.”

Thompson goes on: “She hadn't intended to disappear for 11 days. She was trying to get him back and thought she would be found. I don't think he would have left her had her mother still been alive. I don't think he would have dared.”

“The shock of him saying he wanted to leave she really hadn't seen coming. It was a kind of immense private grief that then became this enormous public thing and that was not her intention at all. She was in the most desperate way. She was trying to make him feel guilty, feel pity and get him back. That was how her daughter conveyed it to me.”

Thompson spent three years going through the extensive archives at Greenway House, Rosalind's home in Devon, which is now looked after by the National Trust.

Thompson found there was saturation coverage of Agatha's

disappearance. “I spent weeks in the newspaper library. It was like Harry and Meghan. Every day, every day, everywhere. Massive, massive, massive.”

Agatha became even more reclusive. Archibald also suffered a nervous breakdown, though he recovered. He had to live with his ex-wife's ever-growing fame. “Every time you open a paper there she would be, you couldn't get away from it. It must have been very strange living with that.”

Incidentally, Archibald had an Indian connection. He was born in the Murree Hills near Peshawar, then in India, in 1889. His father, also called Archibald, was a judge in the Indian civil service. He married Neele in 1928, had a son with her, and remained married to her until her death in 1958. In the 1930s, Archibald took Nancy to India to show her the land of his birth.

Agatha also remarried in 1930. Her second marriage to the archaeologist Max Mallowan lasted until her death in 1976. He died two years later.

Thompson found Agatha preserved Archibald's love letters.

In 1940, Rosalind married Hubert



TURNING THE PAGE: Dame Agatha Christie in March 1946; and (above, from left) Laura Thompson; her book about the author; and David Suchet as Hercule Poirot

© AFP via Getty Images

UPDATED 'FRANKER' BIOGRAPHY REVEALS THE COMPLEX STORY OF BRITAIN'S QUEEN OF CRIME

Prichard and had a son, Mathew, in 1943. Her husband was killed a year later on active service, and in 1949 she married her second husband, Anthony Hicks.

Thompson managed to have a heart-to-heart with Rosalind before her death, aged 85 – the same age as Agatha – in 2004.

Thompson says that with the passing of many of the major characters in the drama, she has found it possible to be franker in her updated biography.

“Her second marriage to Max was quite complex, as well as her first,” she points out. “It was, in some ways, very, very happy. They were very good friends. But there were rumours about his infidelities. And I've been a bit more open about all that. Agatha is defined by her two marriages and by the relationship with her daughter.”

As to what drew her to Agatha, Thompson replies: “I'm a real, *bona fide*

fan – have been from the age of about 10. My mother had them. I probably went from Enid Blyton to Agatha Christie.”

The first novel she read was *Murder on the Links*. Among her favourites are *Five Little Pigs*, *The ABC Murders*, *The Pale Horse*, *Murder is Easy*, and *Then There Were None* and *The Hollow*.

She reckons Agatha has written “76 novels and loads of short stories. And she's a brilliant playwright. Her sensibility is very theatrical. She writes in scenes.” Agatha also wrote six novels under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, “which are very autobiographical.”

“Is there a country in the world that she's not popular? Nobody else can do what she does in my opinion,” Thompson enthuses. “I have read all her novels many, many, many, times. I know them embarrassingly well.”

At one point in the biography, Thomp-

son writes that “Agatha had wanted her marriage to continue...She had longed for freedom and for love, and she was beginning to understand that the two rarely went together. Now she had exchanged one for the other, and she had that other thing: writing.”

In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, “Poirot is talking to the daughter of one of his contacts. They are standing beside a bridge, and the girl says to him that it is a favourite spot for suicides. ‘So it is said. Men are foolish, are they not Mademoiselle? To eat, to drink, to breathe the good air, it is a very pleasant thing, Mademoiselle. One is foolish to leave all that simply because one has no money – or because the heart aches. *L'amour*, it causes many fatalities, does it not?’”

“This was the attitude that Agatha yearned for – again, there was consolation in writing.”