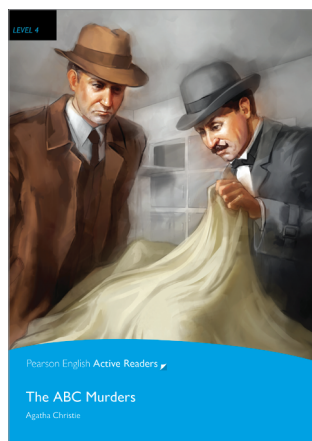


The ABC Murders

Agatha Christie



About the author

Agatha Christie was born in 1890 in Devon, England. She was the youngest child of an American father and an English mother. Her father died when she was eleven and the young Agatha became very attached to her mother. She never attended school because her mother disapproved of it, and she was educated at home in a house full of books. As a young woman, Agatha was described as tall with reddish-gold hair, fun and bright company, although shy at times. She married Lieutenant Archibald Christie in 1914 and in 1919, gave birth to her only child, Rosalind. They divorced in 1928. Two years earlier, following the death of her mother, Agatha had completely disappeared for ten days, adding real life mystery to fiction. She married again in 1930. She had a phenomenal literary career as a writer of crime stories. She published 66 novels, 154 short stories and 20 plays. Her book sales are surpassed only by the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. In 1971, she was awarded England's highest honour, the *Order of the British Empire*. She died in January, 1976, and is buried in the churchyard in Cholsey, Oxfordshire, near where she lived.

Summary

The Belgian detective Poirot investigates what seems to be the work of a serial killer. He receives letters signed 'ABC', which warn him about the crime that is going to happen. After each one, a person whose surname begins with A, B and C is murdered. Finally, after the fourth murder, a strange man called Cust is arrested, but Poirot realises that this man has been manipulated into being at the scene of the crimes and that the real criminal is the brother of one of the victims, who had wanted to inherit his brother's money and had set up the whole thing.

Chapters 1–2: Captain Arthur Hastings travels to London and goes to see his old friend, the retired Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot. Poirot shows Hastings a letter he has received in which he is told to watch out for Andover on the 21st of the month. The letter is signed 'ABC'. Meanwhile, in another part of the country, a man named Alexander Bonaparte Cust takes a railway guide and a list of names from his jacket pocket. He marks the first name on the list. Some days later, Poirot receives a phone call from the police, telling him that an old woman called Ascher has been murdered in her shop in Andover. Poirot and Hastings travel to Andover and the police tell them that they suspect her husband, a violent drunk. Poirot's letter, however, casts some doubt on the matter and an ABC railway guide has also been found at the scene of the crime. Poirot and Hastings visit the police doctor and then they go to see Mrs Ascher's niece, Mary Drower, who is naturally very upset.

Chapters 3–4: Poirot and Hastings search Mrs Ascher's flat, where they find a pair of new stockings. Then they return to London and Poirot receives another letter telling him to watch out for what happens at Bexhill-on-sea on the 25th. The next morning, at a meeting of important police officers, Poirot suggests that the next victim's surname will begin with 'B'. On the 25th a young girl called Elizabeth (Betty) Barnard is found dead on the beach at Bexhill. She has been strangled and there is an ABC railway guide by the body. Poirot and Hastings go to Bexhill and talk to a waitress in the café where Betty had worked. They learn that she had a male friend, who she was probably meeting on the night of the murder.

Chapters 5–6: Poirot and Hastings go to Betty's house and find out that Betty was going to marry a man called Donald Fraser. Betty's sister, Megan, tells them that Donald had been very jealous of Betty because she went out with other men. Then Donald turns up and tells Poirot that on the night of the murder, he had been suspicious and had tried to follow Betty without success. Some time later, the third letter arrives announcing the next crime in Churston, near Torquay, on the 30th, which is the very same day. The letter had been delayed because it had been sent to the wrong address. Poirot, Hastings and a police inspector go to the train station to catch a train to Churston and are told there that a man named Sir Carmichael Clarke has been found dead. They arrive in Churston and meet Franklin Clarke, the dead man's brother, who tells them that Carmichael had not been a

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happy man because his wife was very ill. They also meet Thora Grey, Carmichael's secretary.

Chapters 7–8: Meanwhile, in Torquay, Cust nervously reads a newspaper article about the murders. He tells a man sitting next to him that he has had bad headaches ever since he was in the war. In London, a kind of special legion, consisting of Megan Barnard, Thora Grey, Mary Drower, Donald Fraser and Franklin Clarke is formed. Poirot suggests that they can work together to find clues about the murders. Mary tells a story about some stockings her mother had bought for her sister. Poirot and Hastings then travel back to Churston to see Lady Clarke, who tells them that, contrary to what Thora Grey had previously said, a stranger had visited the house on the day of the murder. Back in London, Donald Fraser visits Poirot and tells him he is having dreams about killing Megan. Then the fourth letter arrives, saying the next murder will be in Doncaster on the 11th.

Chapters 9–10: Thora tells Poirot that she now remembers talking to a strange man and that he was selling stockings. Poirot suddenly realises this is the connection between the murders. Meanwhile, Cust isn't feeling well but tells his landlady that he must go to Cheltenham on business anyway. He then talks to Lily, the landlady's daughter, who is excited by the fact that Cust had been near the last murder scene. Later, Lily's boyfriend, Tom, tells her he saw Cust with a ticket for Doncaster, not Cheltenham. Then, a man is found dead with an ABC guide next to him at a cinema in Doncaster. Cust leaves the same cinema and goes to the Black Horse where he is staying. When he arrives in his room, he notices blood on his coat. He tries to wash it off but a maid enters and notices it. Cust leaves and the maid informs the police. They search Cust's room and find some stockings. Tom tells the police of his suspicions about Cust, but Lily feels sorry for him and phones to warn him that the police are going to look for him. Cust escapes again but is confused and finally ends up walking into a police station.

Chapters 11–12: The police interview Cust and find out that he has an alibi for the Bexhill murder. Then, Poirot interviews Cust and he eventually confesses to the murders. Next Poirot calls a meeting of the Special Legion and announces that Franklin Clarke is the real murderer. Clarke, wanting to inherit his brother's money, had thought of a murder plan. He had met Cust in a café and realised his mental weakness. He sent him letters

from an invented stocking company, offering him a job. He then sent him lists of possible customers, with the murder victims at the top of the list and he sent the ABC letters to Poirot. Franklin murdered all the victims but arranged for Cust to be at the scene of each crime. In Doncaster, he put blood on Cust's coat, hoping the police would arrest him for all the murders, thus freeing him of any suspicion.

Background and themes

Murder mystery: As in nearly all Agatha Christie's novels, the major theme is murder and its subsequent detection. There are a large number of suspects, each with a motive or an opportunity. Poirot manages to solve the mystery because he is clever enough to see the things that others, including the police, fail to see.

Cruelty and justice: Poirot is deeply angered by the manipulation of the poor Mr Cust by the cunning and cruel Franklin Clarke. He compares what Franklin does to a song about trapping a fox in a box, which he believes is a worse fate than death itself. In the end, Cust is released from his misery by Poirot's discoveries.

Serial killers: Throughout the book we believe that a serial killer is committing the murders, following an alphabetical pattern. This gives the police a chance to prevent future murders if they are quick and clever enough and in this way they are drawn into a kind of cat and mouse game with the murderer.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- Discuss:** Write the words *murder* and *motive* on the board and explain the meaning of the second word. Now put students in small groups to think of a list of all the possible motives that a murderer could have. Get feedback from the whole class.
- Discuss, research and write:** Put students in small groups to think of a list of films they know that are about serial killers. Ask them to talk about the plot of the ones they have seen. Get feedback and write the titles on the board. Now students choose a film, find out more information about it on the Internet and write a summary of the plot.

Chapters 1–2

After reading

- Write and guess:** Write the names of the following characters on the board: *Arthur Hastings*, *Hercule Poirot*, *Alexander Cust*, *Mrs Ascher* and *Mary Drower*. Give each student a name and ask them to write two

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sentences, one true and one false, about that character. Students now interact reading out their sentences to each other. Students listen and guess which one is true and which is false.

- 4 **Pair work:** Put students in pairs to ask and answer the following questions to practise the new vocabulary: *At what age do people in your country usually retire? What do people normally do with their free time after they have retired? What kind of clues do the police normally look for after a crime? When was the last time you felt disappointed and why? Do you always tell the truth?*

Chapters 3–4

While reading (p. 19, after 'That was a rather expensive interview, Poirot.')

- 5 **Role play:** Put students in pairs to write the questions they think Poirot asked Mrs Fowler. Students then change partners and one takes the role of Poirot and the other the role of Mrs Fowler to act out the role play.

After reading

- 6 **Write, ask and answer:** Write *Where did Mrs Ascher live?* on the board and elicit the answer (above the shop). Now tell students to write similar questions about Chapters 3–4. Students then interact with each other, asking and answering each other's questions.
- 7 **Write:** Tell students to imagine that they have to write a story for the Bexhill newspaper about Elizabeth Barnard's death. Encourage them to include information about the girl, her family and her job, what happened and any clues the police may have.

Chapters 5–6

While reading (p. 36, after 'There was a lot of discussion whether the general public should be told about the anonymous letters.')

- 8 **Discuss:** Put students in small groups to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making this information public. Tell them to decide what they think the police should do. Get feedback and then get the students to discuss the following questions: *Do you think newspapers should be able to tell any story they like? What things do you think they shouldn't write about? Do newspapers write too much about people's private lives?*

After reading

- 9 **Discuss:** Remind the students that Churston is a beautiful place popular with tourists. Now put them in groups and get them to discuss the following questions: *What places in your country are popular with tourists? Why are they popular? What are the advantages and disadvantages of tourism?*

Chapters 7–8

After reading

- 10 **Discuss:** Remind the students that Donald Fraser is having strange dreams and then put them in small groups to discuss the following questions: *Do you often remember your dreams? Do you often have bad dreams? Have you ever had the same dream many times? Do you think dreams have a meaning?*
- 11 **Pair work:** Write the following names on the board: *Mrs Ascher, Betty Barnard, Carmichael Clarke*. Put students in pairs and ask them to recall everything they can about the murder and how it happened. Then ask them to discuss who the suspects are in each case and why. Can they think of any connection between the cases? Who do they think is the murderer?

Chapters 9–10

After reading

- 12 **Write and guess:** Write *Mr Cust told Mrs Marbury that he had to go away on business to Doncaster* on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (Cheltenham not Doncaster). Now students choose a sentence that somebody said from Chapters 9–10 and rewrite it changing one word. Students interact, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Chapters 11–12

While reading (p. 74, after, 'So Cust has an alibi for the Bexhill murder.')

- 13 **Game: ALIBI:** Tell the students that a murder took place yesterday afternoon between 7pm and 9pm. Tell two of the students that they are suspects and ask them to leave the room to talk about their alibi. Tell them they must discuss all the details about what they were doing at that time. Now tell the rest of the class that they are police officers and have them write questions in pairs that they would like to ask the suspects. Get the suspects to come back into the class one at a time to be questioned. The 'police officers' have to see if there is any difference in what they say. If there is, they are guilty.

After reading

- 14 **Role play and write:** Put students in pairs to write the questions they think a newspaper reporter would ask Mr Cust. Students then change partners and one takes the role of the reporter and the other the role of Mr Cust to act out the role play. As a follow-up, students can then write the newspaper article.
- 15 **Game:** Divide the class into two teams and have each team write ten questions about the book. The teams then ask and answer each other's questions, scoring one point for a correct answer.