
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The world of Agatha Christie

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This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sam

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Sam.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Sam

Have you ever played the game, Cluedo, Neil? The idea is that the person playing detective discovers who the murderer is, where the crime took place, and which weapon was used.

Neil

The last time I played Cluedo it was Professor Plum, in the library, with the dagger!

Sam

Cluedo is based on a very popular type of book – the murder mystery, sometimes called a **whodunnit** – a story about a murder which does reveal who the murderer is until the end.

Neil

The queen of murder mysteries is a British writer who was born in 1890. Her books are read all over the world and have been translated into a 103 different languages. Her name is Agatha Christie.

Sam

To date over 2 billion copies of her crime novels have been sold worldwide, making her the best-selling novelist of all time... and the subject of this programme.

Neil

Perhaps her best-known story is 'Murder on the Orient Express', a whodunnit featuring her most famous detective, Hercule Poirot, who starred in 33 of Agatha Christie's books.

Sam

More about that later but as usual I have a quiz question for you, Neil. Poirot may be Agatha Christie's most famous detective, but he isn't her only one – so who is Agatha Christie's other fictional detective? Is it:

- a) Hetty Wainthropp?
- b) Jessica Fletcher? or,
- c) Miss Marple?

Neil

I'll guess it's a) Hetty Wainthropp.

Sam

OK, Neil. I'll reveal the answer at the end of the programme.

Neil

As mentioned, one of Agatha Christie's most famous books is 'Murder on the Orient Express'. The story takes place on a train travelling from Istanbul in Turkey to Calais in northern France. Listen as writer and Agatha Christie superfan, Harriet Gilbert, summarises the story for BBC World Service programme, World Book Club.

Harriet Gilbert

Poirot is on the train, heading back home to England from Syria, when two unconnected events take place. In a snowstorm in Croatia, the train comes **grinding to a halt** and in one of the sleeping berths, a passenger is murdered. Since it's impossible for anyone to have reached the isolated snow-trapped train or to have escaped from it without leaving **telltale** footsteps in the snow, the killer can only be one of the dozen people sharing Poirot's coach. Yet as he starts to investigate it seems that each of them has an **alibi** for the time of the murder. Impossible? Well, Poirot's certainly **perplexed**...

Sam

During a snowstorm, the express train comes to a **grinding halt** – it slows down until it stops altogether. Then, someone is murdered!

Neil

The murderer can't have escaped without leaving **telltale** footprints in the snow. When something is described as **telltale**, it reveals information which allows a secret to be uncovered. For example, lipstick on your husband's shirt could be a **telltale** sign he's having an affair.

Sam

The murder victim is found in bed stabbed with a knife. Poirot begins to

investigate, but as he questions the train passengers one by one, it seems that everyone has an **alibi** - proof that they were somewhere else when a crime was committed.

Neil

Naturally, this leaves the Belgian detective **perplexed**, or confused because something is difficult to understand or solve.

Sam

I won't spoil the story by telling you what happens next, Neil. But let's just say that, as usual, Poirot uncovers the murderer using his incredible powers of observation.

Neil

In her stories, Agatha Christie describes Hercule Poirot as a very strange or eccentric man.

Sam

The author, Sophie Hannah, has written several new Poirot stories based on the characters invented by Agatha Christie before her death in 1976. Here she is describing more of Hercule Poirot's strange characteristics to BBC World Service Programme, World Book Club.

Sophie Hannah

There's the sort of the outward things, his appearance which is very striking and very unusual, and his sort of, I suppose **foibles** is the best thing to call them, he likes neatness, he likes order, he approaches things very methodically, he's very proud of his luxuriant moustaches, you know, all of that.

Neil

Sophie calls Poirot's unusual behaviour his **foibles** - habits or characteristics which are considered strange or foolish but which harm no-one.

Sam

Yes, unlike the fictional murderers he uncovers, Poirot's **foibles** do no harm, but it makes me wonder if Agatha Christie's other famous detective also had unusual habits.

Neil

Well, first you'll have to reveal the answer to your quiz question, Sam. You asked me for the name of Agatha Christie's other famous detective, and I guessed it was a) Hetty Wainthropp.

Sam

Well, I'm afraid that was the wrong answer! In fact, Miss Marple was the name of Agatha Christie's second most famous character - although Hetty Wainthropp is a fictional detective on TV.

Neil

Now that we've solved the murder and revealed the correct answer, let's recap the vocabulary starting with **whodunnit** - a murder story which does not tell you who the murderer is until the end.

Sam

In the whodunnit, Murder on the Orient Express, the train comes to a **grinding halt** - it slows down until it stops altogether.

Neil

A **telltale** sign reveals hidden information so that a secret can be revealed.

Sam

An **alibi** is proof that you were somewhere else when a crime was committed.

Neil

To be **perplexed** means to be confused because something is difficult to understand.

Sam

And finally, someone's **foibles** are their strange but harmless habits or behaviour.

Neil

That's all for our six-minute investigation into the mysterious world of Agatha Christie. Goodbye for now.

Sam

Goodbye.

VOCABULARY

whodunnit

story about a murder which does not tell you who the murderer is until the end

a grinding halt

something which gradually slows down until it stops altogether

telltale

revealing hidden information which allow a secret to be uncovered

alibi

proof that you were somewhere else when a crime was committed

perplexed

confused because something is difficult to understand or solve

foible

unusual habit or characteristic which is considered strange or foolish, but which does not harm anyone