

# "How Much I Have Loved That Part of the World"

## Agatha Christie and her Mysteries in the Middle East

### Introduction

During her lifetime, famous British author Agatha Christie, most known for her mystery novels, had set several of her novels in the Middle East. This project is an examination of Christie's perception of the Middle East through these books. For the purpose of this project, I studied four of these stories, *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937), *Appointment with Death* (1938), and *They Came to Baghdad* (1951). These books are set in Egypt, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Petra, and a site resembling Ur.

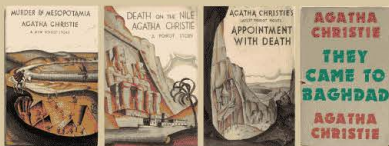


Fig. 1-4: The original UK covers for Christie's books set in the Middle East, various sources

### Christie's Books as a Reflection of her Life

During her life, Christie spent a significant amount of time in the Middle East, mainly due to her husband, Max Mallowan, who was an archaeologist. Due to this, several of these books feature archaeologists and archeological sites as an element of the story, especially prominent in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, which is entirely set in an archeological site. Many other characters also reflect people she knew in her life. The characters in Christie's often portray unfamiliarity and culture-shock at a new place, which may have reflected Christie's own initial feelings. However, Christie loved the Middle East and often wanted to return. It is clear that she had an adventurous spirit. Through her writing, it is also clear that Christie resented the changes occurring in the region throughout her life and looked back on her early trips to the Middle East with nostalgia.



Fig. 5: Christie and Mallowan in 1950. Wikimedia Commons

### The Middle East as a Backdrop

In Christie's books, the Middle East and its people are often not central to the storyline, but instead serve as the backdrop for an exciting mystery. The Middle East is portrayed by Christie as a place where nothing goes according to plan and nothing is as it appears to be. Christie also often mentions the "oriental way of doing things." This also extends to the people in the Middle East. Christie's books feature Western characters as the victims, the suspects and the perpetrators of her murder mysteries, and Judy Suh described these characters as "unabashed tourists." Eastern characters, in contrast, play minor and background roles. However, it is worth noting that these minor Arab characters, who often play servant roles, come under initial suspicion by racist characters. Mevlüde Zengin argues that Arabs are portrayed as a mass, disregarding in individuality, and that by putting them at the social margin, Christie constructs the image of an 'Other'. However, Christie's books portray the idea that Arabs are indifferent to life and death, making it an ideal setting for murders and other crimes. This can be seen in one quote from *Death on the Nile*, in which one character tells another "you should look on death as the Oriental does. It's mere incident - hardly noticeable."



Fig. 6: A steamer passes in front of the small Abu Simbel Temple of Nefertari. The Madras Project

### Conclusion

This project has argued that despite the love Agatha Christie had of the Middle East, she has pervading colonial viewpoints. Christie uses the region and its people as a backdrop to a murder mystery featuring almost exclusively Western characters. Additionally, her books contain uncriticized perceptions of Arabs as being strange and simple. Furthermore, she fails to question the legitimacy of the British colonial presence in the region. Questions on whether Christie should be judged through today's standards for century-old biases, or the role of commercialism in Christie's settings of her books, are outside the scope of this project, but are ones that are worth further investigation.

### Pervading Colonial Views

Christie's books display a profound appreciation for the Middle East as a place she spent many years in and was a central part of her life. However, her books also betray a deeper, subtler, colonial view through Orientalism. Orientalism, as termed by Edward Said, forms binary divisions between the East and the West, legitimizing European power and constructing Eastern people as inferior. Although Christie aims to negatively expose certain orientalist ideas, there are others that she incorporates seemingly without criticism. She portrays her critique through her character's views on the region, that may have not reflected her own. Christie's characters often see the Middle East as chaotic, loud, foreign and strange, and many are clearly unimpressed with the region. For example, Nadia Atia argues that *Murder in Mesopotamia*'s Nurse Leatherne serves as the quintessential English voice critiquing Baghdad, which is also echoed in *They Came to Baghdad*'s main character, Victoria Jones. They also often see the Middle East as unsanitary and dirty, and religious intolerance by the characters is sometimes also featured in the novels. However, these opinions are often subtly criticized through the characters being portrayed as racist and intolerant, or, in the case of Nurse Leatherne and Victoria Jones, their opinions change by the end of the novel. However, there are orientalist themes that are normalized throughout Christie's novels that betray pervading colonial views. The books often portray Arabs as odd, simple and folksy. Their dress, behaviour and especially their "queer chants" are pointed out in several novels. It is also essential to note that the Middle East that is portrayed by Christie is one that is colonized. Colonial figures such as military officials are sprinkled throughout the novels, often playing a sidekick to the story's detective. However, their presence in the Middle East or colonial roles are never questioned, as is the legitimacy of the British presence in the region.



Fig. 7: Procession through Baghdad, 16 November 1918. National Army Museum

