



AGATHA  
CHRISTIE

*A Life*

The Editors of New Word City



AGATHA  
CHRISTIE  
*A Life*

The Editors of New Word City



AGATHA CHRISTIE, A LIFE

THE EDITORS OF NEW WORD CITY

COPYRIGHT

Ask some of your more literate friends to name the bestselling novelist of all time. They will probably come up with a Great Name, one that fills pages of textbooks and occupies a revered place on their bookshelves.

Charles Dickens, perhaps. Or Mark Twain. Or Leo Tolstoy.

They will be wrong.

The winner, with sales of some 4 billion copies, is Agatha Christie. She runs a close second to the Greatest of Names, William Shakespeare, for sales by an author in any genre. (Of course, the Bible has outsold both Christie and Shakespeare. But the Bible in its present form was composed by at least three dozen authors over a period of several hundred years.)

It may seem odd, not to say preposterous, to mention Shakespeare and Agatha Christie in the same breath. In his own figure of speech, Shakespeare bestrides our narrow world like a colossus with his endless variety of extraordinary characters, insights, incidents, passions, profundities, frivolities, charmed lives, and hideous deaths. What might he have to do with the writer of more or less interchangeable accounts of the search for clues to an improbable succession of murders in English country houses or archaeological sites in the Middle East? Where Shakespeare illuminates great historical events and plunges deep into the human soul, Christie untangles intricate crimes in which there seem to be no, or all too many, suspects.

Can you imagine any respectable professor assigning students to make a comparative analysis of long passages from *Murder on the Orient Express* and *King Lear*, to contract *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* with *Death on the Nile*, or to find parallels between *Murder at the Vicarage* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? Agatha Christie may have earned her title as the Queen of Crime, but her work simply doesn't count as literature. As the critic Edmund Wilson sniffed

in a celebrated essay in the *New Yorker* magazine many years ago, “Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?”

That highbrow disdain is understandable, but if we stop thinking of literature for the moment and consider these two authors simply as people from rural England who lived some four centuries apart and aimed to make a living in the world of their times, we will find striking parallels between the lives of Will Shakespeare and Agatha Christie.

Both were born in provincial English towns to upwardly mobile, middle-class families. Both grew to be strong and lively with keen insight, sharp brains, and a consuming curiosity about the lives, loves, interests, and emotions of the people among whom they lived. Both had an urge to tell their neighbors’ stories, and the rare gift of being able to tell them in a way that compelled readers or watchers to find out what was going to happen next, page after page, scene after scene, until they came to “The End.”

Shakespeare and Christie both had the good fortune to arrive on their respective scenes at a moment when new literary forms – uniquely well-suited to their talents - had taken shape and were attracting large and increasingly literate audiences.

In Shakespeare’s case, it was the theatre. Far removed from the traditional church- or state-sponsored performances – passion plays, gladiatorial spectacles, and the like – these were private enterprises that had built or acquired indoor space and put up a stage on which a troupe of actors could mount a collection of plays written especially for them, and for which the public would buy a ticket for a few hours of pleasantly stimulating relief from the aches and boredoms of daily life.

This kind of theatre began in London just a few years before Shakespeare was born in 1564.