The golden age of murder: Agatha Christie and the Detection Club

Almost everyone has heard of crime novelist Agatha Christie, and many have likely come across the term 'the golden age of detective fiction'. But until now, little has been known about the Detection Club, the mysterious social network to which Christie and other major 'golden age' writers belonged

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Here, Martin Edwards, author of the first book about the Detection Club, investigates…

The Detection Club was founded in 1930 by Anthony Berkeley Cox, a gifted but deeply troubled man who wrote detective novels under the name Anthony Berkeley. Two ye

Berkeley had begun hosting a series of dinners for leading crime writers. For him, Christie and Dorothy L Sayers – author of *Whose Body* (1923) and *The Five Red Herrings* (1931) – the club offered a unique opportunity to get together with like-minded colleagues, and escape, if only for a few hours, their traumatic private lives.

Christie, Sayers and Berkeley were part of a new generation of young detective novelists who emerged after the First World War. Christie's first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published in 1920, and introduced a Belgian war refugee called Hercule Poirot.

The war had traumatised the entire nation. Many young men had died or been seriously damaged by the conflict – physically or mentally. Christie's brother was among them, as was Oswald Atherton Fleming, the husband of Dorothy L Sayers. Berkeley, meanwhile, was gassed during the conflict, and his health never recovered.

All three writers plotted ingenious puzzle stories with surprise solutions that appealed to millions of readers. The postwar years were an era of 'play fever', when pastimes such as solving crosswords and contract bridge became immensely popular. Detective novels that 'played fair' when challenging the reader, setting out all the clues – but concealing them with great cunning – offered welcome escape from memories of suffering and slaughter in the trenches.

These books are often dismissed as 'cosy', but there was a reason they did not dwell on graphic acts of violence: authors and readers who had lived through the horrors of the conflict had no desire to wallow in gore.

Christie quickly demonstrated a mastery of the 'whodunit' with a surprise solution – the culprit was usually someone who seemed the least likely suspect. In 1926, she published *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which had a famous shock ending. The novel sparked controversy, but Sayers and other colleagues defended Christie from the accusation that she had not 'played fair' with her readers. The 'whodunit reader', Sayers insisted, ought to consider everybody a potential suspect.

Christie's disappearance

In the same year that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was published, Christie learned that her husband, Archie, was having an affair, and this led to her famous – and highly controversial – 11-day disappearance. The police appealed for public help in searching the Surrey Downs, and 'the Great Sunday Hunt' took place on 12 December 1926. About 2,000 civilians took part, wrapped up warm against the cold. Hot drinks were sold from vans to refresh the crc

Dorothy L Sayers could not resist joining in the excitement, and travelled to the Silent Pool, close to where Christie's car had been found abandoned. The outcome was an anticlimax – Sayers failed to spot any tell-tale clues that the police had missed, and was left to pronounce, with all the authority she could muster: "No, she isn't here."

Christie was eventually found in a spa hotel in Harrogate, where she was staying under an assumed name – which was the same as that of her husband's mistress.


HOUNDS SEARCH FOR NOVELIST

Beagles were used yesterday in the renewed hunt around Newlands Corner for Mrs. Agatha Christie, the vanished novelist, the latest portrait of whom appears above. On the right is Rosalind, her seven-year-old daughter, photographed in the grounds of her home at Sunningdale.

1926: English crime writer Agatha Christie and her daughter, Rosalind, (right), are featured in a newspaper article reporting the mysterious disappearance of the novelist. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Christie's marriage ended in divorce, and for some time she found herself unable to write. The trauma of the disappearance, and the blaze of unwelcome publicity surrounding it, made her reluctant to take part in public events or talk about herself. Berkeley's invitation to meet fellow detective novelists over dinner gave her a chance to get away from the misery of her domestic circumstances, and she grabbed it with both hands.

Christie became one of the Detection Club's 26 founding members, and joined the committee shortly before the Second World War. In 1957 she took over as president of the club – a role she held right up until her death in 1976. She never accepted any similar office, but she and her

second husband [archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan] regularly attended Detection Club dinners – she always felt at home among her fellow crime writers.

Christie was not the only writer to find socialising at the Detection Club as therapeutic as weaving fictional mysteries. Sayers, an intellectual Oxford graduate, was working for an advertising company (and earning very little) when she started to write a detective novel. To cheer herself up, she created an amateur sleuth who was rich and a member of the aristocracy – Lord Peter Wimsey. This has led her to be accused of snobbery, but the slur is unfair. The reality is that she was in need of escapism, just as much as her readers.

A messy affair

Sayers's private life was a mess: she'd had one disastrous romance after another. She fell for a fellow writer called John Cournos, who was at that time much better known than her, but he rejected Sayers and married someone else. On the rebound, Sayers met a man who lived in a flat in the same block, and embarked on a fling with him. By the time she found out he was married, she was pregnant with his child. He wanted nothing more to do with her or the baby.

Sayers's father was a vicar, and she dared not tell her parents what had happened. She arranged for a trustworthy cousin to bring up the child, and to the end of her life she never acknowledged in public that the child was hers. A deeply religious woman, Sayers felt ashamed of herself, and went to great lengths to keep what had happened secret.

She later married an older man who had been mentally affected by his wartime experiences, and created a formidable persona to keep people at arm's length so that her personal life never came under scrutiny. For her, like Christie, membership of the Detection Club proved to be a lifeline, and a source of lasting friendships.

November 1928: English writer Dorothy L Sayers (1893-1957). (Photo by Topical Press Agency/Getty Images)

Growing ambitions

Detection Club members became increasingly ambitious. They knew that the best novels offer more than a chance to play a game, and the talented writers were itching to exercise their literary skills. In 1930, Sayers published, in collaboration with scientific expert Robert Eustace, a fascinating novel *The Documents in the Case*. The epistolary structure of the novel was influenced by her admiration for Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), which uses multiple viewpoints. The book also boasted an audacious plot concerning the nature of human life, no less. It was acclaimed as "the book of the year".

The Detection Club was a social network for novelists long before the days of Facebook and Twitter, with membership strictly limited to the most gifted writers. Soon Sayers was masterminding the club's collaborative projects. Members co-wrote innovative 'round robin' mystery novels, starting with *The Floating Admiral* (1931) in which each chapter is written by a different author.

The BBC also hired the Detection Club to create radio serials. Sayers, Christie, Berkeley and others wrote successive instalments of a whodunit called *Behind the Screen* (1930). Each author (including the supposedly reclusive Christie) read out their chapter in a live broadcast. Each contribution was then printed in the next issue of *The Listener* [a weekly magazine established by the BBC]. Audience members were invited to solve the mystery, but the puzzle was tricky, and nobody got the answer completely right.

This pioneering, cross-media venture was a massive success, and the BBC was keen to follow it up. The Detection Club members were happy to agree, although Sayers often crossed swords with JR Ackerley of the talks department, who kept trying to hurry up the writers to meet the tight deadlines. When he complained that frantic colleagues were raining telegrams upon him, she hit back at once, deploring the BBC's extravagance in resorting so readily to telegrams!

The new story, *The Scoop* (1931), was based on a horrific real-life murder committed by Patrick Mahon, who in 1924 killed his pregnant lover in a remote seaside bungalow. Detection Club members were fascinated by 'true crime', and many of their novels were inspired by real-life cases. The Lindbergh kidnapping [the kidnapping and murder in 1932 of Charles Augustus Lindbergh Jr, the 20-month-old son of aviator Charles Lindbergh and Anne Morrow Lindbergh], for instance, is fictionalised in Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934).

Meanwhile, a character in *The Documents in the Case* [a 1930 novel by Dorothy L Sayers and Robert Eustace] was based on Edith Thompson, who had been hanged in controversial circumstances in 1923 after her young lover, Frederick Bywaters, attacked and murdered her husband.

Berkeley's fixation

Anthony Berkeley in particular became obsessed with the fate of Edith Thompson. He railed against the system of justice that had led to the hanging of a woman whose foolish love letters – in which she talked about her desire for her husband's death – contributed to her fate at the gallows. In Berkeley's opinion, she had been "executed for adultery" rather than for murder.

Berkeley's attitudes were influenced by his obsessive devotion to a woman who was married to someone else. His second book was dedicated to EM Delafield, a fellow writer who shared his distaste for the treatment of Edith Thompson. Delafield wrote a novel inspired by the case, although she is best remembered today as the author of the witty classic *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930).

Like Delafield, Berkeley was fascinated by criminal psychology, and this led him to write his masterpiece, *Malice Aforethought* (1931) under the name Francis Iles. This book explores the psychology of a doctor who decides to kill his wife, and was superbly adapted for television in 1979 by the BBC. Hywel Bennett was outstanding in his performance as the homicidal Dr Bickleigh.

The next Francis Iles book, *Before the Fact* (1932), was a study of a born victim – a wife who slowly realises that she is destined to die at the hands of her charming but amoral husband. When Alfred Hitchcock adapted the story as *Suspicion* (1941), starring Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine, he reversed the ending – the dark vision of the novel was deemed too frightening for cinema audiences.

A US poster for Alfred Hitchcock's 1941 thriller Suspicion, starring Cary Grant and Joan Fontaine. (Photo by Movie Poster Image Art/Getty Images)

Berkeley divorced his own wife and went on to marry the ex-wife of his literary agent, but Delafield, who had young children, stayed with her husband for the sake of the family. Berkeley remained devoted to Delafield, and dedicated to her his last crime novel, *As for the Woman* (1939) – another book influenced by the Edith Thompson case. Shortly afterwards, following the outbreak of the Second World War, Delafield died of cancer, and a heartbroken Berkeley gave up crime writing.

Sayers also abandoned the genre, preferring to concentrate on translating Dante and writing religious plays such as *The Man Born to be King* – a groundbreaking cycle of a dozen plays based on the life of Jesus, broadcast by the BBC to great acclaim from December 1941 to October 1942.

The outbreak of war in 1939 signalled the end of 'the golden age of detective fiction'. Readers' tastes changed, and although Agatha Christie continued to write enormously successful 'whodunits', many of the mysteries written by her colleagues in the Detection Club were soon forgotten. Yet the club lived on, almost in the manner of a secret society – and it flourishes to this day.

Martin Edwards is the author of *The Golden Age of Murder* (HarperFiction, 2015). To find out more, click here.