

The Secret of Agatha Christie's Success

This activity contains: 1/ a text for intermediate students (B1/B2); 2/ some comprehension questions; 3/ the original *Economist* article used for text, and a link to a recording of the article (MP3 file); 4/ a word list for the article; and 5/ answers to the comprehension questions.

(The intermediate text, the questions & answers, and the word list was generated by ChatGPT.)

1/ intermediate text

Fifty years after her death, Agatha Christie is still the most popular novelist in the world.

Some famous critics in the 20th century strongly disliked Agatha Christie's writing. One said her stories were too emotional and boring. Another said her characters were not realistic. Today, however, these critics are mostly forgotten. Agatha Christie, on the other hand, is still read all over the world. According to the Guinness World Records, she is the bestselling novelist of all time. Her books are often turned into films and TV series, including a new Netflix adaptation.

One reason for her success is her choice of unusual detectives. Miss Jane Marple is an elderly, unmarried woman who enjoys knitting and gardening, but she is very intelligent and solves many crimes. Another character, Lady Eileen "Bundle" Brent, first seems silly, but later shows courage and determination.

Even Hercule Poirot, her most famous detective, is very different from others. He is not young or athletic, and he does not use violence. He is small, careful, and pays attention to details. While the police often miss important clues, Poirot sees what others do not. This makes readers feel involved in solving the mystery.

Christie also chose small, closed settings, such as villages, country houses, or a train like the Orient Express. In these places, everyone can be a suspect. These settings remind readers of an older, simpler time. At the end of her stories, order is restored and the mystery is solved, which gives readers a feeling of satisfaction.

Finally, Agatha Christie was very good at creating strong plots. Her stories often surprise readers, but when the solution is revealed, it makes sense. She wrote many novels, short stories, and plays, and although not all are perfect, her hard work explains her long-lasting success.

2/ Comprehension questions:

Part A – General Understanding

1. Who is Agatha Christie, according to the text?
2. How did some 20th-century critics feel about her writing?
3. What shows that Agatha Christie is still popular today?

Part B – Understanding Details

4. Why are the critics mentioned at the beginning mostly forgotten today?
5. What is unusual about Miss Jane Marple compared to typical detectives?
6. How does Lady Eileen “Bundle” Brent change in the story?
7. In what ways is Hercule Poirot different from other detectives? (Give two differences.)

Part C – Reading for Meaning

8. Why do readers feel involved in solving the mysteries?
9. Why are Christie’s settings often small and closed places?
10. What feeling do readers get at the end of her stories?

Part D – Interpretation & Opinion (B2)

11. Why do you think readers enjoy stories where “order is restored” at the end?
12. Do you agree that hard work is an important reason for Christie’s success? Why or why not?

The secret to Agatha Christie’s success

Fifty years after her death, she remains the bestselling novelist of all time

The Economist, Jan 12th 2026 | 2 min read

[Listen to this story \(access the mp3 file\)](#)

The Economist

“HER WRITING is of a **mawkishness** and **banality** which seem to me literally impossible to read,” complained Edmund Wilson. Her characters “are no more real than Cluedo figures”, sneered Julian Symons. Wilson and Symons were prominent critics in the mid-20th century; today few have heard of them. But the object of their **scorn**, [Agatha Christie](#), is **revered**, 50 years on from her death on January 12th 1976. She is the bestselling novelist ever, according to Guinness World Records, and her works continue to be adapted for film and television. A new Netflix series, “Agatha Christie’s Seven Dials”, will premiere on January 15th. Why are people still reading—and watching—her stories?

One explanation is that Christie favoured unlikely **sleuths**. Take Jane Marple, a **spinster** fond of knitting and gardening, who solves crimes in a dozen novels. Or Lady Eileen “Bundle” Brent in “Seven Dials”, who at first seems **dotty** but turns out to be **doughty**. (“To think was to act with Bundle,” Christie wrote.)

Even her most famous detective, [Hercule Poirot](#), **protagonist** of more than 30 novels, is not hyper-rational and physically brave like Sherlock Holmes, nor quick with a gun like his hard-boiled successors. He is short, chubby and **finicky**, with a carefully waxed moustache

and **dandyish** clothes. But her sleuths see things and pursue leads that **elude** the police, making the reader an **accomplice** in their clever independence.

Christie also chose isolated settings, including, most famously, the Orient Express, turning every character into a suspect. Jane Marple works in her [charming village](#) of St Mary Mead. Much of “Seven Dials” unfolds in and around a country home. These **Edwardian locales** transport today’s audiences to (what they think was) a simpler and more romantic time. More importantly, they allow her narratives to restore a sense of order at the end. Unlike, say, the **globetrotting** stories of [Ian Fleming](#) or [John le Carré](#), in which victories only temporarily frustrate an **implacable** foe, Christie’s smaller worlds feel put right when the cover closes or credits roll.

Most obviously, Christie had [an exceptional gift for plot](#). Her twists are cleverly disguised until the point of revelation, becoming obvious only in **retrospect**. “Seven Dials”, with its conspiratorial, slightly **outlandish** conclusion, is an exception, but nobody can write 66 novels, 150-odd short stories and 25 plays and be perfect every time. In short, the secret to her success is that she worked hard and thus became very good at her job. No twist there. ■

Here are **20 relatively unusual or elevated words from the article**, each on **one line** with a **brief definition** and **three synonyms**:

1. **Mawkishness** – excessive or cloying sentimentality; *sentimentality, schmaltz, saccharinity*
2. **Banality** – dullness resulting from over-familiarity; *triteness, cliché, ordinariness*
3. **Sneered** – spoke with contempt or mockery; *jeered, scoffed, derided*
4. **Scorn** – strong contempt or disdain; *derision, disdain, contempt*
5. **Revered** – deeply respected or admired; *venerated, esteemed, honoured*
6. **Sleuths** – detectives or investigators; *gumshoes, investigators, trackers*
7. **Spinster** – an unmarried woman (archaic usage); *singleton, old maid, bachelor woman*
8. **Dotty** – slightly mad or eccentric; *eccentric, scatterbrained, addled*
9. **Doughty** – brave and persistent; *valiant, resolute, plucky*
10. **Protagonist** – the main character in a narrative; *hero, central figure, lead*
11. **Finicky** – overly concerned with small details; *fussy, fastidious, punctilious*
12. **Dandyish** – stylish in an affected or showy way; *foppish, flamboyant, sartorial*
13. **Elude** – evade or escape understanding or capture; *avoid, escape, outwit*
14. **Accomplice** – a partner in wrongdoing; *confederate, collaborator, accessory*
15. **Locales** – particular places or settings; *settings, locations, environments*
16. **Edwardian** – relating to early 20th-century Britain (1901–1910); *early-modern, pre-war, turn-of-the-century*
17. **Globetrotting** – involving extensive travel; *itinerant, peripatetic, far-roaming*
18. **Implacable** – unable to be appeased or stopped; *relentless, inexorable, unyielding*
19. **Retrospect** – looking back on past events; *hindsight, review, recollection*
20. **Outlandish** – bizarre or extravagantly strange; *eccentric, fantastical, bizarre*

5/ Answers to the comprehension questions above:

Answer Key

Agatha Christie – Simplified Text (B1/B2)

Part A – General Understanding

- 1. Who is Agatha Christie, according to the text?**
She is a very famous writer and the bestselling novelist of all time.
- 2. How did some 20th-century critics feel about her writing?**
They disliked her writing and thought it was too emotional, boring, and unrealistic.
- 3. What shows that Agatha Christie is still popular today?**
Her books are still read worldwide, she is the bestselling novelist, and her stories are adapted into films and TV series.

Part B – Understanding Details

- 4. Why are the critics mentioned at the beginning mostly forgotten today?**
Because their opinions did not last, while Agatha Christie's work is still widely read and remembered.
- 5. What is unusual about Miss Jane Marple compared to typical detectives?**
She is an elderly, unmarried woman who enjoys quiet hobbies but is very intelligent and solves crimes.
- 6. How does Lady Eileen "Bundle" Brent change in the story?**
At first she seems silly, but later she shows courage and determination.
- 7. In what ways is Hercule Poirot different from other detectives? (Give two differences.)**
He is not young or athletic, he does not use violence, and he focuses on details rather than action.

Part C – Reading for Meaning

- 8. Why do readers feel involved in solving the mysteries?**
Because the detective sees clues that others miss, and readers try to solve the mystery along with them.
- 9. Why are Christie's settings often small and closed places?**
Because this makes everyone a possible suspect and helps focus the mystery.
- 10. What feeling do readers get at the end of her stories?**
They feel satisfied because the mystery is solved and order is restored.

Part D – Interpretation & Opinion (B2)

- 11. Why do you think readers enjoy stories where "order is restored" at the end?**
Possible answer: Because it gives readers a sense of comfort and fairness, and problems are clearly solved.
- 12. Do you agree that hard work is an important reason for Christie's success? Why or why not?**
Possible answer: Yes, because she wrote many stories over a long time and improved her skills through practice.