

A Guide to *Agatha Christie's Murder on
the Orient Express* by Ken Ludwig

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for OpenStage Theatre & Company

A Note from the Dramaturg

This guide is intended to help you better understand the world of *Murder on the Orient Express*, including many of the characters and historical references in the play. I've included some background on the novel, the characters, and the *Orient Express* itself. I've also included a list of sources if you feel like learning more. With luck, this additional information will make your experience of Agatha Christie's beloved murder mystery even richer.

About the Playwright

Ken Ludwig has had six shows on Broadway and seven in London's West End, and many of his works have become a standard part of the American repertoire. *Lend Me a Tenor* won two Tony Awards and was called "one of the classic comedies of the 20th century" by *The Washington Post*. *Crazy For You* was on Broadway for five years and won the Tony and Olivier Awards for Best Musical. In addition, he has won two Olivier Awards (England's highest theater honor), two Helen Hayes Awards, the Edgar Award for Best Mystery of the Year, and the Edwin Forrest Award for Contributions to the American Theater. His other plays include *Moon Over Buffalo* (starring Carol Burnett), *Twentieth Century* (starring Alec Baldwin), *Be My Baby* (starring Hal Holbrook), *Baskerville*, *A Comedy of Tenors*, *Shakespeare in Hollywood*, *A Fox on the Fairway*, *Leading Ladies*, and a stage version of *Murder on the Orient Express* written expressly at the request of the Agatha Christie Estate. His newest play, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, which tells the story of his parents' courtship during World War II, won the 2020 Helen Hayes / MacArthur Award for Best New Play or Musical. His book *How To Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, published by Penguin Random House, won the Falstaff Award for Best Shakespeare Book of the Year, and his essays are published by the Yale Review. His work has been performed in over thirty countries in more than twenty languages, and his plays are produced throughout the United States every night of the year. You can find out more about Ken Ludwig and his work at www.kenludwig.com.



About the Author

“Ez as igazság. [It is simply the truth.]”
— *Countess Andrenyi*

Dame Agatha Christie (1890–1976) is best known as a writer of mystery novels and as the creator of some of the genre's most iconic characters, including Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot. In fact, her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, published in 1920, was Poirot's debut as well as hers. Born Agatha Miller in Devon, England, she married her first husband, Archibald Christie in 1914 at the age of 24. The couple had one daughter, Rosalind, before Archie's infidelity led them to divorce. A few months after Archie asked her for a divorce, saying he had fallen in love with another woman, Agatha disappeared under mysterious circumstances. On December 3, 1926, Archie had left their home to stay with friends. The next day Agatha Christie's car was discovered abandoned above a chalk quarry with her clothes still inside. The

manhunt attracted thousands of volunteers, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who offered one of Christie's gloves to a psychic to help find her. Christie was located ten days later at a hotel and spa in Yorkshire. She retreated to her sister's house, locking herself away from the press and separating from Archie until their divorce was finalized in 1928. In 1930, she married Max Mallowan, a prominent archaeologist specializing in the Middle East.

Her adventurous married life included tours to Cairo, South Africa, the South Pacific, and other exotic locales that later served as settings for her mysteries. Serving as a nurse in both World Wars, she worked in hospital dispensaries and learned about the poisons that would feature in a number of her novels. Her own experiences riding the *Orient Express*, including a narrowly-missed blizzard, informed one of her most famous mysteries.

By the end of her life, Christie had produced some 66 detective novels and fourteen short story collections. She remains the most translated single author. Her novel *And Then There Were None* has sold nearly one hundred million copies, and her play *The Mousetrap* holds the world record for the longest initial run in history, having opened in London's West End on November 25, 1952 and run continuously until March 16, 2020, when it was closed down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.



Agatha Christie in 1958

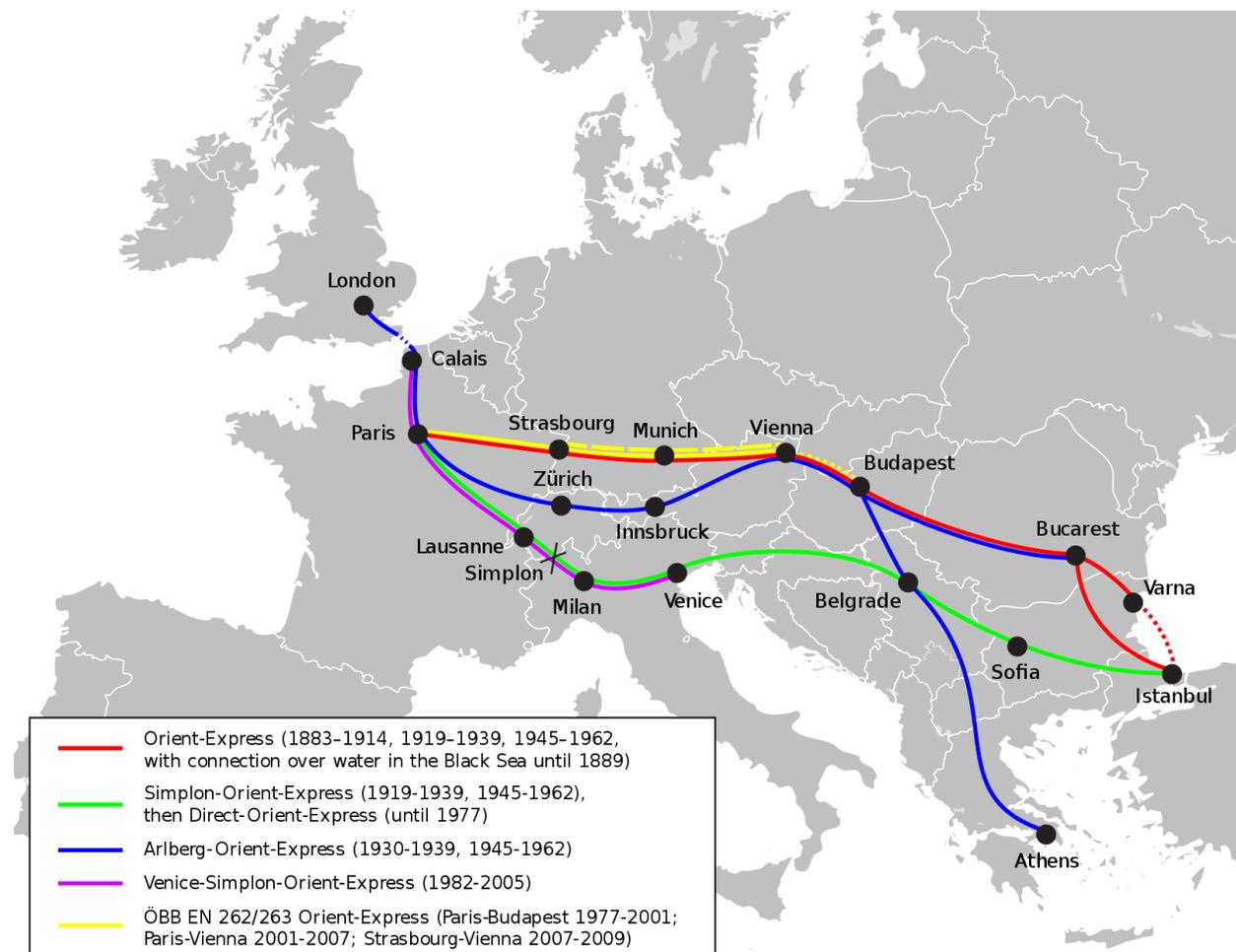
The *Orient Express*

“Veillez faire attention aux marches, soyez prudent et bon voyage. [Please pay attention to the steps, be careful, and have a safe trip.]”

— *Michel the Conductor*

One of the abiding features of *Murder on the Orient Express* is the train itself. Trapping the characters on a snowbound train, preventing escape for both victim and murderer(s), is what gives this particular story its extra helping of tension.

The *Orient Express* began running on June 5, 1883 as a route linking Paris and Istanbul offering luxury accommodations and dining. According to existing records, the train included two baggage cars, a restaurant, and four sleeping coaches with 56 beds total. The first menu, dated October 10, 1882, featured oysters, soup with Italian pasta, turbot with green sauce, chicken “à la chasseur”, fillet of beef with “château” potatoes, “chaud-froid” of game animals, lettuce, chocolate pudding, and a buffet of desserts.



The actual route changed over time to accommodate logistical and geopolitical needs. Service was suspended during World War I (1914–1918) but resumed shortly after the end of the war on November 11, 1918. By 1919 the new Simplon Tunnel drew the route south to Milan, Venice,

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and Trieste, creating the *Simplon Orient Express*, which quickly became the most reliable and significant rail route between Paris and Istanbul.

The heyday of the *Orient Express* was the 1930s, when royalty, diplomats, and celebrities relied on the route. In fact, the popularity of the *Orient Express* was such that three different services ran: the original *Orient Express*, the *Simplon Orient Express*, and the *Arlberg Orient Express* [see map]. Despite this popularity, regular service on the line remained the exclusive province of the extremely wealthy, since the cost of a ticket alone (before meals) would be valued at over \$3,000 US today.

The outbreak of World War II (1939–1945) again stopped service, and when a German company attempted to resume services during the war, Yugoslav Partisans sabotaged the track. Even after the route resumed running in the 1950s and 60s, geopolitical strife and the closing of the Iron Curtain cut off many of its eastern destinations.

Having run its route for over a century, the last iteration of the *Orient Express* was removed from service on December 14, 2009, a victim of high-speed rail systems and air travel. The legacy of the *Orient Express* lives on, however, in literature, television, film, and even video games. The route has not only been immortalized in Agatha Christie's novel but also appears in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), Ian Fleming's *From Russia, with Love* (1957), among other works and is a staple setting for mysteries in film and television, including *Get Smart*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Doctor Who*, and even an episode of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. While the original *Orient Express* is now defunct, parts of it are still in service. These days, the privately-owned *Venice Simplon-Orient-Express* (VSOE) offers luxury service to major European cities and the chance to ride and dine in some of the cars from the original train.



Who's Who?

"Hungarian, French, Russian, Swedish. What were all these people doing on the same train? Something was amiss!"

— *Hercule Poirot*

Hercule Poirot – World-famous Belgian detective

Monsieur Bouc – Poirot's friend and a director of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (managing company for the *Orient Express*)

Mary Debenham – Daisy Armstrong's former governess, returning from Baghdad

Hector McQueen – personal secretary and translator to Samuel Ratchett; his father was the Armstrongs' lawyer

Michel the Conductor – train conductor; father of Daisy Armstrong's late nursemaid

Princess Dragomiroff – a Russian princess; Sonia Armstrong's godmother

Greta Ohlsson – Daisy Armstrong's former nurse

Countess Andrenyi – Sonia Armstrong's sister

Helen Hubbard – actress Linda Arden; Daisy Armstrong's grandmother

Colonel Arbuthnot – Colonel Armstrong's best friend; in love with Mary Debenham

Samuel Ratchett – aka the gangster Bruno Cassetti; Daisy Armstrong's kidnapper and murderer

References

“The facts of the case could not be more simple.”
—*Hercule Poirot*

The Lindbergh Baby & Daisy Armstrong

In March of 1932, headlines everywhere were devoted to the kidnapping of the son of the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh. The toddler, who was supposed to be under the care of his nurse, had been taken from the family home on the evening of March 1. The family found a ransom note, but though they paid the ransom, the Lindbergh baby was found dead on May 12. The case was a sensation and served as Christie’s inspiration for the kidnapping and murder of Daisy Armstrong.

Helena Andrenyi & *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Poirot deduces that Helen Hubbard might not be who she says she is. He presses Countess Andrenyi on this point by telling her that she shares her name, Helena, with the lovelorn character in William Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “the kind of name an actress might choose for her daughter.”

Linda Arden & *As You Like It*

Poirot is sure of actress Linda Arden’s identity after the final Shakespeare reference: her name. The Forest of Arden serves as the fantasy setting for Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Shakespeare grew up next to the English Forest of Arden, and his own mother’s family name was Arden. Poirot might also be familiar with its European corollary, the Forest of Ardennes, since it’s located in his native Belgium.

Snowbound on the *Orient Express*

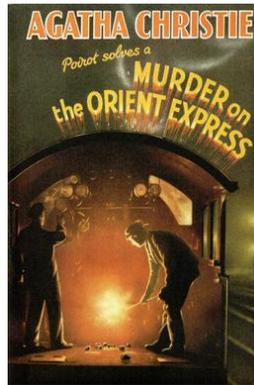
Agatha Christie herself journeyed on the Orient Express in 1928. A few months later, in February 1929, a blizzard held the train snowbound near Cherkeskoy, Turkey for six days. In 1931, flooding washed away a portion of the track, stranding Christie on her way back home from an archaeological dig. Luckily, she was only stuck for a day. However, she wrote a letter to her husband describing several of her fellow passengers, some of whom inspired characters in her novel.

Follow Up

“Exactly! Crazy! That or committed totally to a course of action that meant everything to you.”
— *Hercule Poirot*

Discussion Questions

- One critic of the novel remarked that if Poirot hadn't been on the train, this would have been “the perfect crime.” What factors enter into “the perfect crime”? How does Poirot unravel everyone's secrets?
- The famous plot twist in *Murder on the Orient Express* involves a conspiracy among the train's passengers who feel justified in their respective crimes. Do you think the murder was justified? Why or why not? Where should we draw the line between justice and vengeance?
- Despite the fact that the passengers clearly committed crimes, Poirot and Bouc agree to keep this a secret from the authorities. Do you think this is right? Why or why not? Is it ever right to allow someone to get away with a crime?



Activities

- Compare Ken Ludwig's play to Agatha Christie's novel. What choices did Ludwig make in adapting the novel for the stage? Do you agree with his choices? Why or why not?
- Research the Lindbergh kidnapping and compare it to Christie's fictional Daisy Armstrong. What are the similarities and differences? How do characters in Christie's story correspond to some of the real-life figures around the Lindbergh kidnapping?
- Christie had a knack for observing people and letting them inspire her. Observe some of the people around you and write down your observations. If you invented a character based on one of these people, what would that character be like? What might they do?

Further Reading

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