

CRIME

Would Poirot have solved the case of the Skripals?

Writer *Andrew Wilson* investigates the chilling encounter that led to Queen of Crime Agatha Christie becoming an expert in poisons

Andrew Wilson



Legacy: novelist Agatha Christie, below, would have been fascinated by the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, above Credit: Social media; EAST2WEST NEWS

“In the absence of evidence, we definitely need Poirot in Salisbury!” tweeted the Russian embassy in London in response to allegations that Moscow was behind the poisoning of the former spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia. The statement, which was accompanied by a photograph of David Suchet as the fictional Belgian detective, is a reminder that Poirot’s creator Agatha Christie still holds a grip on the

popular imagination – especially when it comes to poisons.



The Queen of Crime would have been fascinated by the Skripal case. In addition to well-known toxins like arsenic, cyanide and strychnine, Christie's books also featured a range of more obscure substances such as ricin, which appears in her

short story *The House of Lurking Death* (published in the 1929 collection *Partners in Crime*).

Like Novichok – the Russian-sourced poison used in the attempt to kill the Skripals – ricin is a nerve agent, a biological weapon that can kill even in minute amounts. It was used in the 1978 “umbrella murder” of Georgi Markov in London, and in the failed assassination of Vladimir Kostov in Paris. Both men were Bulgarian dissidents and were believed to have been targeted by the Bulgarian Secret Service, with the assistance of the KGB.

The toxic potential of ricin was first investigated during the First World War, a period when Christie herself was learning of the poisons that would feature in her detective stories. “I specialise in murders of quiet, domestic interest,” she said in one interview. “Give me a nice deadly phial to play with and I am happy.”

It was during the war that she created Hercule Poirot, the little Belgian detective with the egg-shaped head. The Great War was also the catalyst that gave Agatha her famous surname. Yet little did 24-year-old Agatha Miller from Torquay know, as she recited her wedding vows, that under her new married name she would become celebrated throughout the world for her crime novels.

Her fiancé Archie Christie, a pilot with the Royal Flying Corps, had sent a telegram asking her to come to Salisbury, near to his base. He suspected he would be dispatched to France and both he and Agatha were convinced they would never see one another again. “I remember going to bed that night and crying and crying until I thought I would never stop,” she wrote in her autobiography.

She joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) as a nurse at the Torquay Town Hall, which had been transformed into a makeshift hospital. When the hospital began to fill with scores of injured men returning from the front, Christie was confronted with lice, vomit, blood, the stench of rotting flesh and bed-pans. During an operation on a patient’s abdomen, she nearly fainted. Recognising the signs, the sister in charge took her to one side and gave her some advice, telling her that “everything in life, one gets used to”. Even more traumatic tasks lay ahead, including carrying amputated limbs to the hospital incinerator. But she learned to bear it all with fortitude.

In 1915, Archie suffered a serious attack of sinusitis, which may have saved his life as he could no longer fly. Agatha too suffered from illness during this time – flu, which turned into lung congestion. She took a break from nursing and in June 1916 started work in the dispensary in Torquay.

While studying for her Apothecaries Hall exams Christie became intrigued by the nature of substances that had the power to both cure and kill. She even wrote a poem about poisons, which included the line, “Here is menace and murder and sudden death.” It was during this period that she began to think about writing a detective novel. “Since I was surrounded by poisons, perhaps it was natural that death by poisoning should be the method,” she later wrote.

At the time Torquay was full of men who had fled Belgium after the German

invasion and so Christie was inspired to make her hero a retired Belgian police officer who had come to Britain as a refugee. She visualised him as just 5ft 4in tall, with a military style moustache. He was fascinated by human psychology and would solve crimes with the power of his “little grey cells”. And so Poirot was born.

He featured in Christie’s first novel – *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, written in 1916, but published in 1920 – and over the next six decades he would star in 33 of Christie’s books. On film and TV he would be played by actors as diverse as Orson Welles, Albert Finney, Sir Peter Ustinov, Alfred Molina, David Suchet and, most recently, Sir Kenneth Branagh.



David Suchet as Poirot in the ITV series

Christie quickly became lauded as the unchallenged Queen of Crime. Yet few of her fans know that one of the biggest inspirations for her career was a chilling

wartime encounter that could have come straight out of one of her own novels. Christie was taking lessons in the science of dispensing from a man in Torquay she named only as Mr P. One day, the pharmacist told her that he carried around in his pocket a cube of curare, the fatal toxin originating from South America used to tip poison arrows.

“Taken by the mouth, it does you no harm at all,” he said. “Enter the bloodstream, it paralyses and kills you.” He asked the young student whether she knew why he carried it around with him. She said she did not. “Well, you know,” he replied. “It makes me feel powerful.”

The mysterious Mr P presented himself as a respectable member of the local community. But Christie sensed that he was “dangerous”, perhaps even deadly. One day, while she was learning the basics of preparing suppositories, the young woman noticed that Mr P had included too much of one particular drug in a batch, rendering them poisonous. “I couldn’t say to him, ‘Mr P, you have made a mistake’”

Christie had to think quickly. Before the suppositories were taken to the store room, she pretended to trip, knocked them to the floor and squashed them underfoot. The chemist with the cherubic expression continued to haunt Christie’s thoughts and later she would use him as the basis for the pharmacist Zachariah Osbourne, a character in her 1961 novel *The Pale Horse*. Indeed, the man “with a nice pink face” who carried poison in his pocket became the blueprint for many of Christie’s seemingly mild-mannered murderers.

Mr P was also one of the inspirations for the sinister Dr Kurs in my new novel *A Talent for Murder*, a book which features Christie and is set in 1926 during the time of her real-life disappearance. Kurs tells her that he too carries around a cube of curare in his pocket.

The novel also features another obscure poison – tetrodotoxin. It seems appropriate that the substance, which is naturally found in food such as puffer fish, has been dubbed the “Russian roulette of dining”.

A Talent for Murder by Andrew Wilson is published in paperback by Simon & Schuster tomorrow (£8.99). To order for £6.99 plus p&p, call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

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