

“If You Enjoyed this Book, Join the Crime Club”:  
Armchair Detection and Reader Participation in Agatha  
Christie’s *The Thirteen Problems*

MEGAN HALFORD

Agatha Christie’s short story collection *The Thirteen Problems* (1932) focuses on two overlapping groups of people who casually meet and exchange puzzling mystery stories. The first of the groups is the Tuesday Night Club, which lends its name to the title of the first story in the collection as well as to the American edition, *The Tuesday Club Murders* (1933). The collection appeared in Britain as part of the Collins Crime Club, which created “a mailing list of members and kept them informed of the latest [book] releases” (R.D. Collins). Anyone could buy the books, but club members received a special free newsletter to alert them of the publication dates. In this way, the Collins publishing company encouraged readers to purchase their books while fostering a sense of inclusion in an elite group of mystery enthusiasts—one that, according to one of Collins’s advertisements, included “two millionaires, three world-famous statesmen, thirty-two knights, eleven peers of the realm, two princes of royal blood and one princess,” as well as members of various professions (“Ephemeral”). This assortment of readers resembles Christie’s fictional “amateur and professional murder buffs gathered in ... ad hoc club[s]” (Barnard 197), which also boast a knight, a novelist, and a famous film actress.

The frame and structure of the stories in *The Thirteen Problems*, combined with their publication as part of the Collins Crime Club, encourage readers to participate alongside the characters by attempting to solve the mysteries. Early reviews of *The Thirteen Problems* and later criticism of Christie’s work suggest that her detached style of writing causes her stories to function primarily as intellectual puzzles and thus engages readers as amateur or “arm-

chair detective[s]” (Maida and Spornick 68). *The Thirteen Problems* mobilizes this puzzle-game style especially well, because the stories contain an additional layer of distance between reader and crime and place a special emphasis on armchair detection and audience engagement. Through the frame of the informal clubs, Christie creates a sense of inclusion by placing her readers, whose presumed membership in the Crime Club indicates their special knowledge of detective stories, in a privileged position alongside Miss Marple, whose life in St. Mary Mead has taught her about “human nature” (Christie 4) and provided her with amazing insight into crime.

Both British and American reviews of *The Thirteen Problems* discuss Christie’s stories in terms of intellectual pleasure without mentioning the crimes in any detail—unlike juicier reviews for other books—and focus instead on Miss Marple’s clever deductions. An anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS) reviewer from September 1932 discusses Miss Marple’s use of vocabulary that foregrounds deduction and downplays the crimes themselves. The anonymous reviewer opens by observing, “Miss Marple here exercises her ingenuity, nourished upon the innumerable problems which village life provides, on thirteen mysteries” (624). Although the reviewer uses the word “mysteries,” which implies a certain amount of strangeness and secrecy, s/he also uses the titular and more academic term “problems” to describe the stories. Crime plays a very minor role in the review. The reviewer refers fleetingly to “a murder in the village” (624), but only to highlight Miss Marple’s success when, instead of listening to a second-hand account, she actively participates in solving a case in “Death by Drowning,” the story she shares with the second story-telling club. By contrast, the next review in the column—of a novel called *The Double Alibi* by Mary Roberts Rinehart—refers in detail to an attempt “to defraud several insurance companies by a faked drowning” and to a “shoot-

ing, faked to look like [an] accident” (624). These differing reviews of works by two contemporary mystery authors reveals a disassociation from crime in favour of logic in relation to Christie’s stories that does not reflect reviewers’ approach to all mystery stories. Notably, the *TLS* reviewer’s emphasis on reasoning connects Christie’s stories more with logic puzzles than violence and foreshadows his/her conclusion that “in general these are all problems to try the intellect rather than the nerves of the reader” (624).

Similarly, in his review of the American edition for the *New York Times* in 1933, Isaac Anderson describes Christie’s stories using diction related to puzzles and games rather than describing any particulars of the crimes. Anderson thereby distances the reading experience from the brutality of sensation crimes and, like the *TLS* review, reaffirms the stories’ purpose as problems for readers to solve and enjoy. Anderson briefly explains the premise of these “amusing mystery stories” and notes that Miss Marple invariably “finds the answer to the riddle” (BR14). The words “riddle” and “amusing” connect the various thefts and murders to entertaining and even childish logic problems. He takes this comparison further when he analogizes Miss Marple’s status in the world of fictional detectives to an advantage in a card game. He writes, “[s]he does not call herself a detective, but she could give almost any of the regular sleuths cards and spades and beat him at his own game” (BR14). In this way, Anderson informs potential readers that Christie’s stories are “very pretty problems” (BR14), in which the reader can play the game alongside Miss Marple. Anderson, like the author of the unsigned *TLS* review, focuses on the pleasant and diverting elements of *The Thirteen Problems*—or, in the American case, *The Tuesday Club Murders*—as the elements that will be of the most interest to potential readers.

As Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick explain in

“The Puzzle Game,” the reactions of these reviewers reflect the fact that “whodunits” like Christie’s function primarily as games for readers, which results in part from Christie’s tendency to distance the readers from the gruesomeness of the crimes in her “clini[ca]l” treatment of death and gore (71). She downplays the most necessary element in a murder mystery—the murder itself—in order to focus on the process of solving the crime. Christie explains her approach to murder in her statement, “I don’t like messy deaths. Anyway, I’m more interested in peaceful people who die in their own beds and no one knows why. I don’t like violence” (qtd. in Maida and Spornick 68). Equally, just as she does not thrill her readers with brutality, she does not typically evoke their sympathy for the murder victims: “[a]lthough some exceptions to the rule occur, most victims possess personal flaws which render them unsympathetic characters” (Maida 71). The detectives must still catch the murderers, but Christie makes the crimes seem unimportant, if not altogether justified, and separates the pleasure of reading her novels and stories from emotional responses. These distancing techniques necessitate an alternative form of reader engagement, which Christie creates with great success through the puzzle-game, in which “[t]he reader ... moves with the sleuth as an armchair detective in a detection process which is both an entertainment and a heady challenge” (Maida and Spornick 68).

In contrast to more typical detective stories, the stories in *The Thirteen Problems* contain two layers of armchair detection: the characters make deductions based on second-hand narratives within the confines of a domestic setting, and their clubs emulate the passive and recreational experience of reading a detective story. Even when reading an action-packed detective novel, an armchair detective detects very little; for example, one might identify a particularly important clue amidst the narrator’s descriptions the way

Miss Marple does. Miss Marple demonstrates this type of attention to detail when she connects a trifle that was served to a murder victim with an earlier reference to “hundreds and thousands” (Christie 11), which most listeners assumed meant money but in fact referred to poisoned sprinkles. Ultimately, an armchair detective deduces possible solutions simply for pleasure on the basis of a narrator’s account of a crime.

Reader engagement becomes especially pertinent for stories like “The Tuesday Night Club,” in which the characters also function as armchair detectives and pursue solutions to crimes as a form of domestic entertainment. The club members provide interesting crimes, motives, and misleading evidence for each other in much the same way as novels do, and successful solutions rely on the completeness of the account. Even Miss Marple’s clever deduction about the poisoned trifle referenced previously relies on Sir Henry Clithering’s interviews with the nosy hotel maid (5) and with Gladys Linch (11). Because the police already know the truth, having solved it long before Clithering recounts it in the story-telling club (4), Miss Marple’s correct reasoning helps no one. The club exists to determine “what class of brain really succeeds best in unraveling a mystery” (2) rather than to aid in solving cold cases. The characters attempt to match wits with the police or whoever originally solved the mystery, just as readers hope to prove that they are as clever as Miss Marple by picking up on the same vital clues. Furthermore, like Miss Marple’s conclusion about the trifle, a reader helps no one when s/he succeeds; the deductions remain private entertainment. The domestic setting enhances the parallel between the characters and the experience of a reader, who, like Miss Marple, might sit with his or her copy of *The Thirteen Problems* in a “big grandfather chair” by the hearth (Christie 1). The inaugural meeting takes place in Miss Marple’s home, where she knits complacently throughout

the account of the crime, emphasizing the leisurely nature of her deductions (Christie 1). Through the domestic setting and the sedentary format, Christie takes her audience and her characters, who also become an audience for each other, into a space of pure armchair detection.

The narrative frame of Christie's stories, with its dual layers of armchair detection, mirrors the arrangement and objectives of the Collins Crime Club: Christie depicts the sort of amateur sleuths to whom Collins hopes to market their books. The Collins Crime Club "was launched on 6 May 1930 as an imprint/extension of the Collins publishing house and remained active, albeit latterly less so, until April 1994" (R.D. Collins). The Club, which published many of Christie's novels and story collections, also distributed the free quarterly magazine, which informed members of "the forthcoming titles for the next three months" (Collins), and contained crossword puzzles, advertisements, and book reviews. The books themselves contained postcard advertisements for the club, which included the enrolment form on one side, and the dust jackets encouraged readers to become members (Collins). Their slogans tied membership to a love of detective novels: for example, one postcard insert claims that the club is "for lovers of detective fiction," and another reads, "if you enjoyed this book, join the Crime Club" ("Ephemeral"). Collins hoped that the free club would encourage all frequent mystery novel readers to enroll as members, thus allowing them to reach their market. The aforementioned diversity of the membership—whether true or not—also created an apparently inclusive environment, in which the average Christie fan could simultaneously engage in deduction simultaneously with Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple, as well as the various celebrities and aristocrats that the club claimed as its members.

The readers of Christie's Crime Club books, who, although they may not be members, might still identify themselves as detective fiction enthusiasts, have a special advantage akin to Miss Marple's: they know the detective genre in much the same way that she knows human nature from her life in St. Mary Mead and, therefore, have experience to help them predict the solutions. Because the club marketed its books to self-identified "lovers of detective fiction" ("Ephemeral"), there is an underlying assumption that Christie's readers are already well versed in armchair detection. As a result, Christie engages these hypothetically knowledgeable readers by depicting armchair detectives making their deductions, and by placing her audience in a privileged position. Like Miss Marple, her readers have a special interest in mysteries and possess special insight into the various crimes that the characters describe. Miss Marple demonstrates her passion for puzzles even before the official formation of the club. Her nephew, Raymond, begins a discussion of unsolved mysteries, and Miss Marple swiftly provides the example of Mrs. Curruthers, who had misplaced "two gills of pickled shrimps" (2). She begins to elaborate with "her cheeks growing slightly pinker with excitement," but before she can examine any of the numerous "possible explanations," Raymond cuts her off (2). Her enthusiasm for suggesting different outcomes for this story indicates her pleasure in hypothesizing, and mirrors the satisfaction of reading and considering the different solutions that the Tuesday Night Club members propose. Miss Marple's skills for solving more serious mysteries stem from the darker knowledge of human nature she has gained in St. Mary Mead. She solves the first case by noticing the clues about the trifle, but she also mobilizes her knowledge of a parallel case from her village (12) in much the same way as a reader might recall a similar case from a different detective story. Her knowledge of the "distressing things [that] happen in villages"

(3) serves as a parallel for the reader's familiarity with the tropes of detective fiction.

Unlike Christie's other novels and stories, in which detectives personally hunt for clues and interview suspects with readers following along passively, *The Thirteen Problems* requires mental exertion on the parts of readers and characters alike. The urgency to solve the case and the gory details that are a part of other detective stories are largely absent, leaving only the pleasures of logical deduction and inclusion into a community of like-minded people. Christie engages non-fictional armchair detectives by depicting fictional armchair sleuths. She positions her readers alongside Miss Marple as the people who possess the special skills required to solve the mysteries. The reader's presumed familiarity with, and enthusiasm for, the puzzle-game reflects Miss Marple's life in St. Mary Mead and her resulting knowledge of human nature. Furthermore, the frame of the informal clubs echoes the Collins Crime Club, which included readers in a club of armchair detectives similar in function and diversity of membership to the clubs in Christie's stories. The anonymous *TLS* reviewer calls the format of the collection "sedentary" (624), which, though evidently intended as a criticism, accurately captures the readerly passivity with which Miss Marple and her companions solve—or attempt to solve—the crimes, and reflects the experience of the readers who might read the book on the strength of the review. Christie's stories and the Collins Crime Club combine to give readers a feeling of inclusion and skill that non-club-related novels and stories might fail to impart. This intellectual engagement replaces the thrills associated with violence and the urgency of unsolved crimes with amusing logical puzzles, drawing readers into a multi-layered community of mystery lovers.



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