Branka Kovačević, Alfa BK University, Serbia

Intriguingly Real Life of the Queen of Crime

Martinetti, Anne, Guillaume Lebeau, and Alexandre Franc. Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie. London: SelfMadeHero, 2016. pp. 119.

This December it will be ninety years since Agatha Christie disappeared for eleven days and despite the fact that there are many biographical books about her life and work, nobody knows for sure what provoked her to vanish, sending shockwaves in British society in 1926. Whatever the cause may be, this disappearance has remained a mystery and inspired French authors Anne Martinetti and Guillaume Lebeau, along with the illustrator Alexandre Franc, to create a graphic novel: Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie. Marinetti has also written a cookbook inspired by Agatha Christie, entitled Creams and Punishments, while together with Lebeau, she has co-authored the encyclopedia Agatha Christie from A to Z.

Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie was originally released in 2014 as a French-language Kindle edition and was first published in English in May, 2016 by the UK press SelfMadeHero, which specializes in graphic novels and manga adaptations of classic literature, like those of Shakespeare, Poe and Kafka. The story is told through 112 illustrated pages and concludes with a thorough timeline of key events in Agatha Christie's life, as well as a complete bibliography. It is noticeable that novels and story collections featuring Hercule Poirot take up the greater part of her bibliography. The authors of this biography assume a similar approach in showing the significance of this fictional character in Christie's career (and life), representing Poirot throughout the text as her companion and advisor without using any graphic techniques to stress the fictionality of his character. The authors make strong attempts to convey the close relationship that Christie built with her most prominent character, one who always seems to appear in this biography during her moments of extreme loneliness, and one to whom Christie owed a great deal – as she admited

eISSN 1847-7755; doi: 10.15291/sic/1.7.lc.8

herself when she decided to buy the Greenway House in December 1938 (Martinetti, Lebeau, and Franc 80).

The authors here delve into the world of a modern woman, one with a free spirit, whose life was eventful and adventurous, filled with constant travelling, flying, surfing through Europe, America, Africa and Middle East. They also show how these thrills fed her fertile imagination. The question that is immediately posed, however, is what made Christie's life – however eventful and inspiring – intriguing enough to become the subject of yet another biography, with both an authorized and numerous unauthorized versions already published and available? We could say that this question is partly answered by the very form of this edition: while readers have the opportunity to find out many verified details regarding Christie's intimate life, inspiration, and preoccupations, they are also drawn into the archetypal theme of many comics – the story of an inscrutable hero who fights against imposed social circumstances. The specificity of this book is that it starts from and ends in the mystery and sensation of Agatha Christie’s disappearance.

In December 1926, Agatha Christie disappeared for eleven days, and to this day no one has found out the precise reason for the cause of this mysterious disappearance. This event created disorder amongst the public and led to speculation. Even well-known writers of detective novels dealt with the examination of the case of Christie’s disappearance, including Edgar Wallace, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Dorothy L. Sayers, which implies that at the time the disappearance was considered to be highly significant and provocative – perhaps precisely because it combined the tragedies of her personal life with the tropes of the fiction she so frequently employed in her writing. This disappearance was also of significance for journalism, paving the way for reporting on scandal related to celebrities. Speculation still exists that the dispute with her first husband was the reason for her disappearance. After eleven years of marriage, Archibald Christie admitted to loving another woman. The betrayed and disappointed Christie saw in this a reflection of the deceit and disorder underlying her life, commenting to herself and Poirot that she “should’ve seen things more clearly, better known my husband, instead of idealising him” (Martinetti, Lebeau, and Franc 17). Edgar Wallace commented that, “This disappearance seems to be a typical case of mental retaliation against someone who’s harmed her. To put it bluntly, her primary intention seems to have been to hurt someone who would be affected by her disappearance” (Martinetti, Lebeau, and

Franc 59). Others, however, have argued that it was a marketing ploy, thought up by her agent. Some have justified the disappearance by referring to Agatha Christie's mental problems and inability to cope with her popularity as well as the death of her mother. Whatever the case may be, we are left to solve it ourselves.

In Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie, Christie's husband, Archibald Christie, is detained for interrogation at the police station and remains the primary suspect. Christie checks into a hotel in Harrogate, taking the name of her husband's mistress, Teresa Neele, and spends her days there. The only thing she asks for is to be provided with a safe in which she can leave something valuable. As to what this could be is something that readers will have the opportunity to discover at the end of this graphic novel.

Hercule Poirot makes an appearance for the first time in this biography at the moment when she is left alone in the hotel room, and he will remain physically present as her faithful companion throughout all essential moments. While the audience appeal of a thriller or a crime story should not be underestimated when discussing the long-lasting popularity of Christie's fiction, one should also bear in mind that the inter-war period when a great number of the Hercule Poirot novels and stories (18 between 1920 and 1938 out of a total 40) were published is generally recognized as the era of high modernism in literature, with numerous acclaimed authors presenting their aestheticized visions of a fragmented and shattered world. In such a literary and historical context, the detective figure – and particularly Hercule Poirot, one of its most famous representatives – was seen as an indispensible agent in helping to cleanse the community, "weaving together that which appears scattered, clarify[ing] that which seems hopelessly murky" (Martin). According to Martinetti, Lebeau, and Franc, Poirot is "methodical, orderly, logical, and . . . hate[s] seeing facts distorted to match a hypothesis" (71). It is thus perhaps understandable why the authors of this graphic novel/biography choose to introduce Poirot precisely at the moment when the whole country is making conjectures as to Christie's disappearance – his appearance is an attempt to shed some light on the author's life, her worries and anxieties. However, not even the famous detective can discover the reasons for Christie's disappearance and the authors of this publication leave us without an answer to this. There seems to be an existing emptiness, some form of amnesia with which Christie herself justifies the reasons for her disappearance.

Thus, this biography ironically (and self-consciously) fails to fulfill what is promised by its very title. It is always expected that a biography will present a set of facts. The title Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie leads us to the false belief that this is a true biography, a true-to-fact account of events, while also implying that there is a false life of Agatha Christie. However, the more we read on, the more we come to the realization that fiction and reality irreversibly intertwine. Where the authors deviate most noticeably from the classical biography is, of course, in the introduction of fictional characters – Christie's protagonists (apart from Hercule Poirot) include Miss Marple and Tommy and Tuppence, with all of whom Agatha had a special relationship.

It might seem that Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie offers its readers an opportunity to become acquainted with a relatively lonely woman who chooses to escape into her writing in order to avoid the disappointment her life has brought. Through the portrayal of her childhood, where she experiences being teased by her brother, looking up to her sister, and dealing with the death of her father, we realize that Christie is a woman who has built a shield around herself made up of her fictional characters led by the Belgian detective. Christie is dedicated to her writing to such an extent that she forgets the world around her, and even occasionally forgets her daughter Rosalind, born from the marriage with Archibald Christie. In this enjoyable book, perhaps the most emotional moment is when her daughter, while considering the possibility of Christie's marriage with Max Mallowan asks her, "How about me? Do you love me?. . . As much as your books?" (Martinetti, Lebeau, and Franc 69) There is a torrent of emotion in that question from a young woman, who jealously vies with inanimate objects for her mother's affection.

As well as her adventures, her great skill, and her self-reliance, romance is also an important part of Christie's life, though perhaps also the most unsatisfactory one. As we find out, Max Mallowan cheats on her much like her first husband, and this is perhaps the point at which we can finally understand Christie's relationship with Hercule Poirot – the only one with whom she succeeds in building a stable relationship. Love is an illusion, like Poirot himself – but Poirot is an illusion all her own. Asked by Ariadne Oliver, yet another of her fictional characters, why men keep betraying her, Christie replies, "Maybe because I don't really need them? Or maybe because they never know who I really am? Agatha Christie. . . Mrs Mallowan. . . Mary Westmacott. . . Ariadne Oliver. . ." (Martinetti, Lebeau, and Franc 98).

This emphasis on the impossibility of truly knowing the person behind the name Agatha Christie only echoes the mystery established by her disappearance – the mystery that is the core of this biography. This is also what makes this biography so appealing; however, it offers a lot more than simple appreciation and enjoyment of a good mystery. Agatha: The Real Life of Agatha Christie will undoubtedly be useful to all scholars and researchers who approach the oeuvre of Agatha Christie – or, perhaps even more importantly, the issues of biography and/or different postmodern issues of the relationship between history and fiction – from various theoretical and methodological standpoints.

Works Cited

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