
The “Illustrious and the Vulgar”¹: Christie, Culture and Commerce in the Golden Age of Detective Fiction

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Abstract

Between 1920 and 1940 the publishing industry in Britain underwent significant changes. Established publishing houses such as The Bodley Head and Collins had to adapt their lists and, more fundamentally, their business philosophy in order to survive after the First World War. Economic and political change alongside improvements in education created new audiences for publishers who were forced to question their role as literary gatekeepers and guardians of culture. During this “Golden Age of Detective Fiction” Agatha Christie and her detective writing peers were part of a middlebrow movement which captured the attention of a suburban general public and the derision of the literary establishment elites. This paper explores how the “Golden Age of Detective Fiction” was emblematic of interwar tensions in publishing when houses had to decide which path they might follow: culture or commerce?

Key Words

Agatha Christie, Detective Fiction, Culture, Commerce, The Bodley Head, Collins, Modernism

Introduction

“Both within academic analysis and the popular imagination, there exists an assumption that the economy is in some way at odds with culture.” (Miller 2006, 6) This tension between commerce and culture is especially seen when considering that publishing in the first half of the 20th century was undergoing a shift brought on by huge societal changes. Culture – in all areas – was broadening out from being the preserve of a genteel elite.

¹ Ortega y Gasset quoted in Carey 1992, 17

Publishers who considered their role to be gatekeeper of this narrowly defined culture were experiencing significant challenges, especially during the interwar years. Many publishing houses struggled to define themselves in this new landscape and The Bodley Head is a good example of a publisher who arguably failed to adapt successfully after the First World War.

Between the First and Second World War detective fiction and Agatha Christie in particular, rose to prominence, often read by the growing suburban, middlebrow population. Christie is, in 2017, the world’s best-selling novelist with sales estimated at between two and four billion, and five million new sales each year (Taylor 2009). Her extensive backlist of 66 detective novels and 14 short stories have been translated into over 103 languages and her readership is thought to be around half a billion (Grossvogel 1983, 1).

The early 20th century was also the era of modernist literature, a highbrow movement which very definitely placed itself on the side of culture rather than commerce and, for many modernists, in opposition to the middlebrow. Christie did not hold literary pretensions – upon receiving a CBE in 1956 she is reported to have said “One up for the lowbrows!” (Cook 2013, 53) – yet she was published by The Bodley Head, a publisher known for its support of the avant-garde and experimental highbrow works. Middlebrow was a pejorative term at the time and in some instances remains so today. As Miller (2006, 7) states in *Reluctant Capitalists* “one cannot assume that literary merit is both transparent and commercially unprofitable. Rather, the process by which a book gets defined as ‘serious’ is a social and political one”. The “Golden Age of Detective Fiction” marks a point at which book culture adjusts with the realisation that money and art might be combined without undue compromise to a literary work’s merit. How well does the early career of Agatha Christie illustrate this debate between culture and commerce in the interwar period and reflect the social changes, especially for women, which were taking place at the time?

Taking aspects of the author’s career, such as her publishers and responses to her work, this article will attempt to unpick some of the debates around culture and commerce in early 20th century publishing by focussing on Christie’s publishers, The Bodley Head and Collins,

and their differing publishing approaches. It will also look at the reception of her work among readers and critics and importantly Christie herself.

The Bodley Head

Christie was first published by John Lane at The Bodley Head. The publisher had kept hold of her typescript for two years before *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was published in the USA in 1920 and a year later in England – both to great success. With a reputation for publishing innovative and controversial works, The Bodley Head (in 2017 an imprint of Penguin Random House) might initially seem a strange choice for Christie, or rather Christie a strange choice of author. This was a house which in the late 19th century had become “a mecca for the young poets, artists, and ‘New Woman’ writers of the period” (Nelson 1991, 41). Oscar Wilde had contributed deliberately non-commercial work having been a fan of The Bodley Head’s earlier *The Yellow Book* – an illustrated literary quarterly – and the controversial first UK printing of *Ulysses* by James Joyce would be published by them in the 1930s. Towards the end of the 19th century Elkin Matthews had ended his partnership with John Lane and this marked the first step toward a more commercial set-up for the house with Lane now fully in control as “the untiring salesman and ... maker of contracts” (Lambert and Ratcliffe 1987, 88).

Lewis Coser (1982, 363) stated, “publishing in capitalist countries has always been a matter of commerce” but for many British publishing houses in the 1920s there was a reticence to view their work in these terms, even after a war and ongoing economic slump. After the First World War, under the influence of new recruit Allen Lane, The Bodley Head began to vary its output with a mixture of high and lowbrow modernism. With the acquisition of authors such as Agatha Christie, the 1920s marked a distinct change in The Bodley Head’s publishing philosophy; a shift away from the role of cultural gatekeeper toward a more commercial publishing enterprise. Production costs were kept as low as possible - savings were made by purchasing remainders of fine paper – and authors were taken on with “at best a modest royalty only after production costs had been paid” (Nelson 1991, 41).

The contractual terms to which Agatha Christie had agreed were not particularly favourable – she received £25 for her first novel (Bargainnier 2005, 199) – and so, in time, her agent Edmund Cork convinced her to move to Collins. It was with Collins – in its various guises throughout the 20th century – that Christie would stay, though allowing her friend Allen Lane at Penguin the rights to republish some of her backlist later in her career. Due to a misunderstanding, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was an exception; having been one of Allen Lane’s first ten Penguin paperbacks in 1935, it was rapidly withdrawn and replaced with *Murder on the Links* (Lewis 2005, 98).

During the 1920s and 30s – both under The Bodley Head and Collins – Christie’s books were routinely published as hardbacks. Publishing titles in this format lent an air of highbrow respectability that paperback editions at this time did not have. The Bodley Head’s early attempts at paperback publishing had proved unsuccessful, “a total failure in no time at all” (Bargainnier 2005, 257). *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* had been published as one of the house’s unsuccessful ninepenny paperbacks. Until Allen Lane revolutionized the industry in Britain with Penguin, paperbacks were cheaply produced, marketed and designed. The Bodley Head’s hardback designs for Christie were elegant and in keeping with the rest of the house’s output.

Though there existed a discrepancy between The Bodley Head, as a publisher with highbrow ambitions, and Agatha Christie, an author of the self-confessed lowbrow, by signing Christie, The Bodley Head was tentatively taking a first step into mass market publishing. The press packaged her work in a similar way to other highbrow content, thus lending the work, and the publisher, a degree of artistic integrity while still publishing in a format with which they were comfortable. Unfortunately, The Bodley Head had not managed to keep up with the times and though they had ways of saving money for the business, in production and author contracts, they were loss-making for much of the 1920s (Lambert and Ratcliffe 1987, 263).

At the time of John Lane’s death in 1925 The Bodley Head was failing as a business. Allen Lane attempted to innovate throughout his tenure but the house remained insolvent until receivers were called in in 1936 (Lewis 2005, 35). Arguably, The Bodley Head needed to

embrace the middlebrow sooner and with more enthusiasm in order to survive as an independent publishing business post the First World War.

Collins

Was the publishing approach of Collins significantly different to The Bodley Head? Was the company more keen to embrace populism? Founded in the 19th century by William Collins in Glasgow, and similarly to other publishers of this period, Collins was dynastic and patriarchal. Collins was initially a rather conservative publisher of Bibles but over the generations - though the younger Collins's were very much “gentleman” publishers - they did move with the times by investing in high-quality printers and publishing popular authors.

By the early 20th century the house (as many others) created series which were designed to appeal to the new “mass” readership. The *Collins Handy Illustrated Pocket Classics* went on to sell 29 million over 50 years (Trevitt 2014). The company had always invested well in its technology and so was able to take advantage of mass production early on. Sevenpenny editions and Penny Library editions for schools demonstrate that, as early as 1907, Collins was happy to position its business squarely amongst the mass market. They were seemingly unconcerned with ideas circulating at the time from people such as T.W.H. Crosland who in *The Suburbans* sneered that suburbanites “frequent idiotic free libraries and buy cheap reprints of the classics” (Crosland quoted in Carey 1992, 57).

Another example of Collins more inclusive approach to publishing detective fiction was the long-running Collins Crime Club (from 1930 to 1994). Book clubs – an idea imported from the USA – rose to prominence between the wars with Britain's first, The Book Society, founded in 1929. Other clubs followed over the next ten years such as Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club and many publishers “saw them as a valuable source of income” (Feather 2006, 157). This genre-specific book club demonstrates that Collins embraced the market for middlebrow fiction and catered for readers in a way that The Bodley Head did not. Book clubs were disdainfully regarded by some in literary circles such as Q.D. Leavis who declared that they were “instruments not for improving taste but for standardising it at the middlebrow level” (1939, 229).

The Crime Club operated in a different way to other clubs: it was free to join and books were distributed through booksellers and libraries. Unlike other book clubs, readers were not sent set titles, rather a newsletter with a list of titles forthcoming, arguably more list promotion than gatekeeping. Agatha Christie’s work was routinely released as Collins Crime Club editions with Harper Collins re-releasing the editions, in a facsimile of their original format, in 2011. The back cover blurb on *The Murder at the Vicarage* informs the reader that “Detective Novels are read by Cabinet Ministers, Business Magnates, Harley Street Specialists, Famous Judges, Bishops and Leaders of Religion, Teachers and men and women in every sphere of life” (Christie (b) 2011, back cover). It is not an uneducated audience that Collins is aiming for, their blurbs and marketing literature reflecting a more open-minded attitude to their wide readership. The Crime Club magazine emphasised these attitudes by referring to the high-quality writing of *Murder on the Orient Express* in its advert for the same title (Collins 2004).

Responses to Agatha Christie’s work

Unlike Edmund Wilson (1944) who “hoped to never read another of her books” Christie had many illustrious literary admirers. W.H. Auden was such fan of the genre as a whole that he penned the essay *The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story* though he did compare reading this type of fiction to an addiction (1948, 406). Auden also made the point that he separates out the work of Raymond Chandler from that of Christie and her peers, “I think Mr Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of the criminal milieu” and that Chandler’s work should be approached by the reader and judged “not as escape literature, but as works of art” (408).

The BBC’s Desert Island Discs online archive (as of 21 June 2017) only records two occasions when Christie’s work was chosen by an interviewee, once in 1970 and again in 1989. Though the rather less “establishment” website Goodreads (as of 21 June 2017) is filled with positive comments about her work from readers perhaps reflecting that its contributors are less concerned with how their cultural capital is perceived than the guests of Radio 4 programmes.

For an author with such a high number of sales finding evidence of Christie’s readership beyond the well-known is difficult. As of June 2017, the Open University’s UK RED project only records one instance of a reader mentioning Christie. According to Rzepka (2005, 112) the rise of the commuter railway had led to a rise in popularity for short stories, in turn, paving the way for the success of the detective novel. While Auden (1948, 411) suggested that the reader of detective fiction was “a fairly successful professional man with intellectual interests and well-read in his own field”, the truth was arguably that Christie’s readers, as with the genre as a whole, was as Rzepka states (2005, 157) a “largely female audience” made up of “middle-class housewives”.

In *After the Great Divide* Andreas Huyssen stated that “mass culture was the feminized ‘other’ of high modernism” (Huyssen quoted in Schaub 2013, 2). Christie and her contemporary female detective writers mixed fairly “forward-looking gender politics with backward-looking class politics” and the emphasis on the latter often masked the contribution these women made to book culture in the 20th century (Schaub 2013, 2). At the same time as Christie *et al.* were spearheading a quiet revolution the modernist avant-garde were retreating into conservative space; seemingly determined to keep women and the working classes out.

Following in a tradition of English language detective novels from Poe through to Conan Doyle, Christie and the other “Golden Age” detective fiction writers were offering an alternate response to modernity; housed in a domestic sphere, suburban and feminised and therefore regarded by modernists of the day as unrefined and lacking sophistication. “[M]odernists’ expressed a profound sense of anxiety and seemed to always think of the world as breaking apart, Agatha Christie’s staple detective-hero reassuringly manages to put things back together” (Martin 2015).

Christie’s work and detective fiction from this era, perhaps due to its popularity, is regarded as lacking sophistication by some. The author John Banville (Banville quoted in Doyle 2015) stated, “They more resemble crossword puzzles, and finishing one of them, like finishing a puzzle, leaves one with the same ashen sense of futility and wasted time”. Schaub (2013, 10)

writes “I have never yet met a literary scholar who will admit to having read Georgette Heyer at any age”. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Joan Acocella (2010) stated the opposing view, “The intellectuals didn’t just read detective stories, they wrote them”. Christie, however, argued that she was not an intellectual and did not see herself as a literary figure. It is understandable why Christie might have “imposter syndrome” during this period. As Virginia Woolf (1929) wrote in *If Shakespeare Had a Sister* women had to overcome not simply a lack of opportunity but outright hostility to the notion that they could be writers of worth, “I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare”.

As a woman writer Christie was incredibly undervalued in a predominantly masculine industry and was not confident to refer to herself as a writer – in the same way that Virginia Woolf did – feeling she was an imposter in the literary world. Virginia Woolf set up the Hogarth Press to be able to publish works but Hogarth’s output (in the early years, at least) was entirely different to Christie’s, with hand-printed pamphlets and booklets. Despite shying away from public engagements throughout her career Christie was very much in control and demonstrated this by making the move to Collins. She took decisive action against, what she felt, had been an unfair deal, “They had not treated a young author fairly, I considered. They had taken advantage of her lack of knowledge and her eagerness to publish a book” (Christie 1977, 328).

Conclusion

The study of publishing culture in the interwar period offers up many excellent examples of the ongoing debate between culture and commerce; arguably one of the best examples being the early career of Agatha Christie. There was a constant and unresolved tension as demonstrated by the actions of The Bodley Head and to the reception of Christie’s work. The mass popularity of Christie’s work was therefore problematic for The Bodley Head; the publisher’s symbolic and cultural capital had been aligned to its non-commercial, highbrow output which ran counter to publishing commercially successful works marketed to a wider

audience in a “mass” format. Perhaps fearful of how aiming for commercial success might affect how The Bodley Head was perceived the house did not embrace the middlebrow enough. Eventually Allen Lane left and set up Penguin as a separate business which was aimed squarely at a middlebrow readership and proved to be one of the 20th century’s great publishing success stories.

The gentlemanly publishing culture which struggled on beyond the First World War felt its power threatened by the democratisation of culture and the response to it therefore was to denigrate and dismiss the middlebrow “masses” in an attempt to retain control. Agatha Christie, as an author popular with women and with the burgeoning, educated working and middle classes, was a victim of, what Sean Latham (Latham quoted in Schaub 2013, 10) describes as the “snob appeal” of modernist texts which are still today “icons of cultural capital”.

It is undeniable that the “masses” were important to publishing houses’ economic capital but it was enlightened individuals such as Allen Lane who took steps to move with the times and modernise the publishing industry away from a narrowly-defined culture for the elite to a more democratised, open and commercial enterprise. These influential individuals had understood that society was changing and they were happy to cater towards a growing, suburban, literate population. There was a delicate balance to achieve for publishers between economic and cultural capital but commerce was necessary; the likes of highbrow modernists such as Eliot, Woolf *et al.* were simply not commercial enough to sustain a business. However, the move away from the highbrow did not necessarily mean a shift straight to the lowbrow; there existed a middle, commercial path as Lane would prove with his Penguin series and Christie proved with her astonishing sales figures over the 20th century.

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