

An introduction to *The Thirteen Problems*

Mathew Prichard

The Thirteen Problems introduces Miss Marple and the world of St. Mary Mead to crime fiction. It began life as a series of six stories written for 'Sketch' magazine in 1928 and was later expanded into the full thirteen and published in 1932.

It centres on a group of people who meet once a week to discuss unsolved crimes drawn from their own past. Over the course of two mystery evenings, Miss Marple's close circle of friends and neighbours' are developed into the fully rounded characters, now so familiar to Christie readers. It is here that we meet the authoritative ex-commissioner Henry Clithering; respectable clergyman Dr Pender; local solicitor Mr Petherick; upright Colonel Bantry and his wife Dolly and Miss Marple's nephew – Raymond West.

I think that taken together, this collection of short stories encapsulates the quintessential Miss Marple mystery. Time and again, despite the learned intellect and worldly knowledge of the assembled party, it is the sweet old lady in the corner, seemingly absorbed in her knitting, who cuts to the core of every heinous crime, uncovering murderous intent with startling accuracy and apparent ease. It is a tantalising challenge to orthodox assumptions about cosy village life and harmless little old ladies.

Like Agatha Christie herself, Miss Marple certainly defies all stereotypes. A gentle woman whose 'faded blue eyes; benignant and kindly' conceal a fierce intellect and powerful intuition. She never actually lays claim to any great detective powers herself, but possesses a fundamental understanding of people and their weaknesses. As she herself puts it: 'human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at closer quarters in a village'.

My grandmother placed Miss Marple very firmly within the traditions of Victorian crime and punishment. Her knowledge of human nature may be complex, but her belief in the importance of justice is clear-cut and she is perfectly prepared to punish the guilty in order to protect the weak. There is no unkindness in her judgements, but she has little time for 'soft' humanitarian ideas and modern sentimentality; she knows only too well how 'very wicked the world is'. She smiles benevolently on young love and romanticism but like my own great-grandmother, she always expects the worst of people and is invariably proved right.

Miss Marple's firm but fair approach seems to reflect my grandmother's own feelings on criminality. Ultimately my grandmother's belief was that killers were evil for the community once proved guilty and it is almost as if she speaks through Miss Marple when she says that it is '*innocence that matters, not guilt*'.



Agatha Christie said that when she created Miss Marple she had no intention of continuing her for the rest of her life, or of providing a rival to the popularity of Hercule Poirot but the shrewd spinster insinuated herself into her life almost without her knowledge. She has gone on to establish herself just as quickly and as firmly at the heart of her readers' affections and I think that she has become an enigma and an international treasure in her own right.

The Thirteen Problems is perfect proof, were proof needed, of the incredible fertility and ingenuity of my grandmother's mind. The readability of the book and the apparent simplicity of her style belie the real depth of stories which are each strong enough in their own right to be expanded into full-length novels. This is classic crime fiction that stands the test of time because at the core of each story there is a complex and genuinely intriguing puzzle. This book allows us the opportunity, once again, to marvel at Agatha's uniquely plotted, effortless art.

My grandmother despaired that a new generation were reading crime books solely for the love of violence, and taking a 'sadistic pleasure in brutality for its own sake'. Here, she invites us to re-engage our minds, to take pleasure in exploring our own powers of deduction, to solve the mystery before the murderer strikes again.

