

Teacher's notes

Stories of Detection and Mystery

by Agatha Christie and others



SUMMARY

This book contains eight gripping stories, written by seven different authors, among them the internationally renowned detective writer Agatha Christie, the much loved British writer, G K Chesterton, and Denis Wheatley, famous for his stories of the supernatural.

In *The Blue Cross*, written by G K Chesterton, a detective is on the trail of a famous thief. There are strange clues and a simple-looking priest holds the answers ...

In *Philomel Cottage*, by Agatha Christie, a young woman marries a man she has recently met. Then she realises that her life is in danger ...

In *An Unpleasant Man*, by Cyril Hare, a murderer betrays himself through his use of an American expression ...

The *Unlucky Theatre*, by Elliot O' Donnell, is an eerie ghost story.

In the highly original *The Mezzotint*, by M.R. James, a picture keeps changing.

In *Family Affair*, by Margery Allingham, a couple disappear from their house in the middle of breakfast.

The Invisible Man, by G. K. Chesterton, is about how we do not notice 'ordinary' people. But in this case, the ordinary person is a murderer.

In the last story, *The Case of the Thing that Whimpered*, by Dennis Wheatley, a succession of mystifying murders is solved in an extraordinary manner.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

All seven authors are British. Of them, Agatha Christie is the most famous. Born in 1890 in England, she worked in a hospital during the First World War and acquired a knowledge of poisons, which she made good use of in her novels. Her first detective story, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, written in 1920, introduced the Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, who was to appear in many subsequent novels. Agatha Christie wrote about 67 detective stories and became hugely popular all over the world for the way in which her ingenious plots keep the reader guessing right until the end of the story. She died in 1976.

The multi-talented G. K. Chesterton was a poet, essayist, novelist and journalist. He was born in London in 1874 and died in 1936. He is best remembered for his poems, several of which are very famous, and also for his short stories about Father Brown, an innocent-looking priest with a wonderful ability to solve crimes.

Cyril Hare, who lived from 1900 to 1958, was a mystery writer, lawyer and county judge. He wrote a number of excellent mystery stories and is most famous for *Tragedy At Law* (1942), a classic in the detective story genre.

Elliot O'Donnell (1872-1965), wrote a number of non-fiction books on the supernatural. He also wrote a

novel and a collection of short stories about the supernatural.

Montague Rhodes James (1862-1936) was a distinguished scholar who became Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. His ghost stories, which he started writing in 1904, strongly influenced later writers in that genre.

Margery Allingham (1904-1966) was a successful writer of detective fiction, noted for her ability to create real characters and for her eye for detail.

Finally, Denis Wheatley (1897-1977), wrote extremely popular 'satanic' stories about the occult. A prolific writer - he sometimes produced several novels a year - his most famous story is probably *The Devil Rides Out* (1935).

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

As the title of the book, *Stories of Detection and Mystery*, indicates, the stories fall into two categories, detective stories and tales of the 'supernatural'. Stories of the supernatural have always been with us - there are 'ghost stories' that are thousands of years old - but detective stories are a much newer genre. It is generally agreed that the first full-length detective story was *The Moonstone*, written in 1868 by the English author, Wilkie Collins (also published in this series at Level 6).

The success of the Sherlock Holmes stories inspired other writers to write a series of stories involving one detective. G.K. Chesterton started writing his Father Brown stories in 1911 and these became very popular - people were amused by the idea of the simple-looking priest who was so clever at solving difficult crimes.

The element that the public most enjoy in detective fiction is, of course, the 'puzzle' element. The detective story sets out to challenge and surprise the reader. With the clues available in the story, can the reader solve the puzzle, or work out who has committed the crime? Who is going to get to the answer first, the reader or the novelist?

Christie was master of the 'twist' in the tale, the unexpected ending that makes a story so good. In *Philomel Cottage*, the main character has deduced that her husband is going to murder her. Terror and tension mount - there seems to be no escape for the victim. And then, when you have given up all hope for her, comes the twist! You can only admire the inventiveness of the author.

G.K.Chesterton's *The Blue Cross* and Cyril Hare's *An Unpleasant Man* are other stories in this collection that end with an ingenious twist. The other two detective stories, *Family Affair* and *The Invisible Man*, are rather more straightforward, but still with the strong element of 'puzzle' that makes this genre so enjoyable.

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The two stories of the supernatural are quite different. *The Unlucky Theatre* is an atmospheric ghost story. *The Mezzotint* is a tale that will send shivers down your back for quite a long time afterwards. Its basic idea – that of a picture that keeps changing – is not a new one. The English novelist and playwright, Oscar Wilde, wrote a famous novel on this theme called *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. But in *The Mezzotint*, the changing picture depicts a crime.

Denis Wheatley was a master of the supernatural tale. However, the story in this collection, *The Case of the Thing that Whimpered*, is not one of these tales. The writer succeeds in convincing the reader that the supernatural is at work – but in the end we discover that a crime has been committed!

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Teach students the word *thriller*. In pairs, students look at the following types of book and for each pair, say which type they prefer and why.

detective stories/romantic stories
ghost stories/adventure stories
thrillers/historical novels

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

The Blue Cross

In pairs, students make sentences about the story using these words. Then they put the sentences in the order of the story.

a sweet shop oranges and nuts soup a broken window
salt and sugar

Philomel Cottage

Put students into groups of four. Two of the students start to act the scene between Alix and Gerald from the time they go outside to have coffee till the arrival of Dick. The third student acts as director and prompter. He directs them (movements, expression, etc) and also follows the scene in the book, helping them when they have difficulties remembering. Encourage the two playing Alix and Gerald to improvise.

An Unpleasant Man

In pairs, students answer the following question.

Write the story of how Harris succeeded in murdering his servant Wilson.

The Mezzotint

In pairs, students order the stories they have read according to:

- how frightening they are
- how clever they are

Family Affair

In pairs, students write the conversation that the McGills have as they travel away from their past life in the taxi.

The Invisible Man

In pairs, students choose the paragraph in the story that they would choose to put on the back cover of the book. They explain their choice.

The Case of the Thing that Whimpered

In pairs, students write Angela Orson's story from the time she was kidnapped to the time she was found.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

In pairs, students do the following question.

Imagine you are a brilliant detective. Write one or two paragraphs giving advice to someone who is training to be a detective.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.)

The Blue Cross

arrest (v) if the police arrest you, they take you away because they think you have done something illegal

heath (n) an area of open land where grass, bushes and other small plants grow

inch (n) a unit for measuring length equal to 2.54 centimetres

inspector (n) a police officer of middle rank

invisible (adj) something that is invisible cannot be seen

relief (n) a feeling people have when a bad experience has ended

shilling (n) an old British coin

suspect (v) feel that something is probably true

Philomel Cottage

butcher (n) someone who owns or works in a shop that sells meat

cottage (n) a small house in the country

inn (n) a small pub or hotel, especially one in the countryside

nightingale (n) a small bird that sings very beautifully, especially at night

skeleton (n) the structure consisting of all the bones in a human or animal body

An Unpleasant Man

agency (n) a business that provides a particular service

agent (n) a person or company that represents another person or company in business

sergeant (n) a low rank in the army, air force, police, etc

staff officer (n) an officer who helps a military commander of a higher rank

trunk call (n) a telephone call between places that are a long distance apart

Mezzotint

mezzotint (n) a picture that is printed from a metal plate that is polished in places to produce areas of light and shade

Family Affair

chestnut (n) a smooth, round, brown nut that you can eat

penny (n) a small bronze coin used in Britain since 1971, worth one hundredth of a pound

The Invisible Man

clockwork (adj) clockwork toys, etc have machinery inside them to make them move when you turn a key

squint (v) to look at something with your eyes partly closed in order to see better

The Case Of The Thing That Whimpered

handrail (n) a long bar fixed to the side of a passage or stairs for people to hold while they walk

kidnap (v) to take someone away illegally in order to get money for returning them

whimper (v) to make low crying sounds or to speak in this way



Student's activities

Stories of Detection and Mystery



Photocopiable

These activities can be done alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

Read the Introduction. Match the sentences with the writers.

- This writer created two detectives called Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple.
- This writer wrote social history as well as mystery stories.
- This writer was a lawyer and a judge.
- This writer wrote stories about a priest.
- This writer wrote four collections of ghost stories.
- This writer wrote about a secret agent called Roger Brook.
- This writer wrote serious books about ghosts.

Activities while reading the book

THE BLUE CROSS

Read to the top of page 10 ('... even then.')

- Correct the mistakes in these sentences.
 - Valentin is the head of the Spanish police.
 - Flambeau cannot change the fact that he is rather short.
 - The priest tells everyone about the gold thing with blue stones.
 - In the restaurant, someone had put pepper in the sugar bowl.
 - The waiter told him a priest had thrown a cup of tea at the wall.
 - Someone had changed the tickets on the apples and nuts.
 - While Valentin was on the bus, he saw a clothes shop with a broken window.
- What is Valentin's method of working? What is your opinion of his method?
- Who do you think the priests could be? Why are they doing these strange things, do you think?

Read to the end of the story

- Complete these sentences.
 - The waiter is surprised when he looks at the bill because ...
 - The woman in the sweetshop sends a package to Westminster because ...
 - Valentin realises that the reason why Flambeau is with Father Brown is because ...
 - Valentin has terrible doubts while he listens to the priests because ...
 - Father Brown suspected Flambeau because ...
 - Father Brown gave the package to the woman in the sweet shop because ...

- Valentin and Flambeau raise their hats to Father Brown because ...

- Make the conversation between Father Brown and Valentin after Valentin arrests Flambeau. In their conversation, Father Brown again explains why he did such strange things.

PHILOMEL COTTAGE

Read to the middle of page 29

- Work in pairs and answer these questions.
 - Explain the relationships between these people:
Alix/Dick Windyford
Alix/Gerald Martin
 - In pairs, make the conversation between Alix and the gardener.
Mention these things: going to London/Philomel Cottage/£3000
 - Describe Alix's dream. Do you think she is right to be suspicious of Dick? Say why/why not.
 - Alix feels suddenly afraid of Gerald. Do you think she is right to feel this? Say why/why not.
 - What do you think Gerald plans to do at 9.00?

Read to the end of the story

- Put these events in the right order.
 - Gerald says his coffee is bitter.
 - Gerald dies.
 - Gerald comes home with a spade.
 - Alix phones 'the butcher'.
 - Alix tells Gerald how she poisoned her husbands.
 - Alix discovers some newspaper cuttings.
 - Dick and a policeman arrive.
 - Alix opens a locked drawer.
 - Alex realises that her husband is Gerald Martin. 67
- On page 33, it says, 'Unconnected facts suddenly fitted together?'
What are the facts and how did they fit together?
 - Why did Alix have the dream about Dick? Do you believe people can have this kind of dream? Say why/why not.

AN UNPLEASANT MAN

- Work in pairs. Answer these questions.
 - What does Harris want the police to think?
 - What crime did Benjamin Spencer commit?
 - Why does Harris murder Wilson?
 - Why does Joseph Spencer hate Harris, do you think?

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Student's activities

- (e) How does Place suddenly realise who the dead man is and what has really happened?
- (f) Why does Place call Joseph Spencer back?
- 2 Write a sympathetic letter from Place to Wilson's family telling them about Wilson's murder.

THE UNLUCKY THEATRE

Work in pairs. Write down what the five most important facts are about this story, in your opinion. Then compare your facts with another pair.

THE MEZZOTINT

- 1 Explain the part these things play in the story.
an open window Anningley Hall £2 2 shillings
black clothing with a white cross moonlight
a child Mr Green 1802 an open area of grass
- 2 How is it that the picture shows what happened to the child, do you think?

FAMILY AFFAIR

- 1 Match these sentence halves:
- (a) The Campions had half eaten their breakfast
(b) Bertram Heskith usually dropped in to see the McGills
(c) Peter walked to the top
(d) The McGills climbed over the garden wall
(e) Miss Dove stood on a chair and watched
(f) When he won the Irish Sweep, Peter McGill
(i) at about 7.30 in the morning.
(ii) didn't want to share it with his relatives.
(iii) and went down a narrow path to the next street.
(iv) Maureen hanging out the sheets.
(v) of the street as usual.
(vi) when they disappeared.
- 2 Make a list of the relatives who live around the McGills house. Would you like to be surrounded by relatives? Say why/why not.

THE INVISIBLE MAN

Read to the bottom of page 90

- 1 Say where these things happen.
- (a) John Turnbull Angus asks Laura to marry him.
(b) Isidore Smythe and James Welkin both offer to marry Laura.
(c) Laura receives her first letter from Smythe and hears James Welkin laugh.
(d) Smythe and Angus see a long piece of paper that says, 'If you marry Smythe, he will die.'
(e) Angus sees Welkin's message to Smythe: 'If you have been to see her today, I shall kill you.'

- 2 Work in pairs. Discuss these questions.
- (a) Why do you think Laura has twice heard Welkin's voice?
(b) Do you think Welkins will kill Smythe?
(c) What would you do if you were Smythe?

Now read to the end of the story

- 1 Complete the questions using these words:
Who How Where
Then answer the questions.
- (a) does Angus ask to watch Smythe's house?
(b) does Father Brown know that someone has entered the flat(before he goes inside)?
(c) do they know that someone has been murdered?
(d) is Mr Smythe's body found?
(e) does the murderer carry Smythe's body?
(f) is the Invisible Man?
- 2 Work in pairs. Look at the last sentence of the story. What do you think Father Brown and Welkins said to each other as they 'walked those snow-covered hills under the stars? Write their conversation.

THE CASE OF THE THING THAT WHIMPERED

- 1 Answer these questions.
- (a) Who has been missing for nearly two months?
(b) Who fell and broke his neck?
(c) Who says that no one entered the storehouse at night?
(d) Who has a lot of scientific equipment for studying ghosts?
(e) Who thought that the killer might be an Ab-human?
(f) Who almost dies but manages to hold onto the handrail of the walkway?
(g) Who was shot by Bruce?
(h) Who was whimpering?
(i) Who was kept in a secret room?
- 2 Orsen says, 'What people believe to be ghosts are nearly always the working of the imagination or tricks which have been played for a special purpose.' Do you agree with this statement? Say why/why not.

Activities after reading the book

Now you have finished the book, say which stories you preferred, the detective stories or the ghost stories. Give reasons for your choice.

Which was the best detective story? Which was the best ghost story? Again, give reasons for your choice.

