

The SPINSTER SLEUTH

Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple has been played on screen (both big and small) by a cavalcade of actresses over the years. But who best embodied our favourite amateur detective asks Simon Button?

In just five years we'll be celebrating the centenary of one of the world's most famous, if one of the most unassuming amateur detectives. It was in December 1927 that then 37-year-old Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie penned her first Miss Marple story, *The Tuesday Night Club*, in the pages of the literary periodical *The Royal Magazine*. From here, Jane Marple would appear in 19 more short stories and 12 novels, starting with 1930's *The Murder at the Vicarage* and finishing with 1976's *Sleeping Murder*. Those Miss Marple tales are among Christie's most popular tomes and it's no surprise that a whole host of actresses have, over the years, breathed screen life into this quiet, laser-brained spinster.

Miss Marple made her cinema debut in 1961 with the movie *Murder, She Said*. Based on the author's 1957 novel *4.50 from Paddington*, it was ➔

Margaret Rutherford played Miss Marple in four films and made a cameo appearance in Poirot 1965 movie *The Alphabet Murders*.

fairly faithful to its source, apart from one thing – Marple herself. Despite dedicating her 1962 novel *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* to *Side to Side* star Margaret Rutherford, Christie was never a fan of the actress' rambunctious, thigh-slapping take on her precious character. You see, Christie was especially protective over Miss Marple. Unlike Hercule Poirot, who was a wholly fictional character, conjured from her febrile imagination, Jane Marple was based on someone close to the author – her own grandmother.

"Though a cheerful person," Christie said of her, "she always expected the worst of everyone and everything and was, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right." It could be Marple she's talking about there.

Rutherford would play Marple in three further movies – 1963's *Murder at the Gallop* (actually based on the Poirot novel, *After the Funeral*), 1964's *Murder Most Foul* (again, based on a Poirot book *Mrs McGinty's Dead*) and 1964's wholly original *Murder Ahoy*.

It would be 16 years before Marple re-emerged on the big screen. 1980's *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. Played by Angela Lansbury, this cigarette-smoking Marple, while closer than Rutherford, still wasn't

quite the character of the books.

The literary Miss Marple, you see, was always a watcher, not a doer. Her sleuthing talents come from observing, listening, picking clues up from the foolishly off-guard. "I am afraid I am not clever myself," Marple once said, modestly, in the short story *The Tuesday Night Club*, "but living all these years in St Mary Mead does give one an insight into human nature."

The American Helen Hayes was next up, playing Marple in a duplet of US-made TV movies, *A Caribbean Mystery* (1983) and *Murder with Mirrors* (1985). The films themselves aren't much cop, despite the acclaimed crime novelist Sue Grafton co-creating the screenplay to *A Caribbean Mystery*. In between those two small-screen flicks, however, the BBC debuted its first ever adaptation of the Miss Marple novels, starting with *The Body in the Library* in 1984.

Joan Hickson was 78 when she took her bow as Agatha Christie's most famous detective, yet she'd been in line for the role for 40 years. After appearing on stage for the play *Appointment With Death*, Christie wrote to the then 30-something



After seeing her on stage, Agatha Christie (above) always hoped Joan Hickson (right) would play her beloved Miss Marple.

DID YOU KNOW?

Miss Marple was never intended to become a rival to Hercule Poirot. Agatha states in her autobiography, "Certainly at the time I had no intention of continuing her for the rest of my life".



actress, "I hope one day you will play my dear Miss Marple." Hickson can also be spotted in a small role in the Margaret Rutherford Marple film *Murder, She Said*. This time, though, she was centre stage, in what Christie purists believe is the definitive set of Miss Marple adaptations.

Over the next eight years, all 12 of Christie's Marple novels were adapted, climaxing with *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* over the Christmas of 1992. During its run Hickson was awarded an OBE, with the Queen reportedly telling her, "You play the part just as one envisages it."

DIVIDING OPINION

Hickson proved so textbook as Jane Marple that it seems no one wanted to go near the books for years after. There was a radio adaptation, starring June Whitfield as St Mary Mead's finest, that ran from 1992 to 2001, but it wasn't until 2004 that ITV geared up a companion show to their toweringly popular Poirot series. Agatha Christie's Marple would divide fans, however. A total of 23 episodes were made, not only the 12 official Marple books, but also a smattering of non-Marple tales, into which the sleuth was sometimes awkwardly levered. Even the official Marple stories were messed with. Plots were mucked about, characters

expunged, even killers changed. And Jane herself was given a needlessly tragic back story, having had a doomed love affair with a married soldier killed in the First World War.

Geraldine McEwan played the character for the first three series until she decided to retire from acting, with Julia McKenzie filling the role from series four. Agatha Christie's Marple (the 'Miss' was dropped to link it to ITV's similarly monikered Agatha Christie's Poirot) concluded in 2013 and, since then, we've had no further Miss Marples on the big or small screen.

While Hollywood is finally waking up to the commercial possibilities of Agatha Christie's work (we've had big screen versions of *Death on the Nile* (2022), *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Crooked House* (both 2017) recently, not to mention lavish TV adaptations of *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (2022), *The Pale Horse* (2020), *The ABC Murders* (2018) and *And Then There Were None* (2015)), it seems no one yet is quite brave enough to tackle Miss Jane Marple.

Miss Marple is perhaps Christie's greatest creation because she's us, sitting in an armchair watching and listening to these people buzzing about, looking for that little detail that doesn't make sense, that hubristic slip-up that gives everything away.

"It really is very dangerous to believe people," she once said. "I never have for years."

A GAME OF MISS MARPLES

From left to right: Margaret Rutherford, Angela Lansbury, Helen Hayes, Joan Hickson, Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie.

