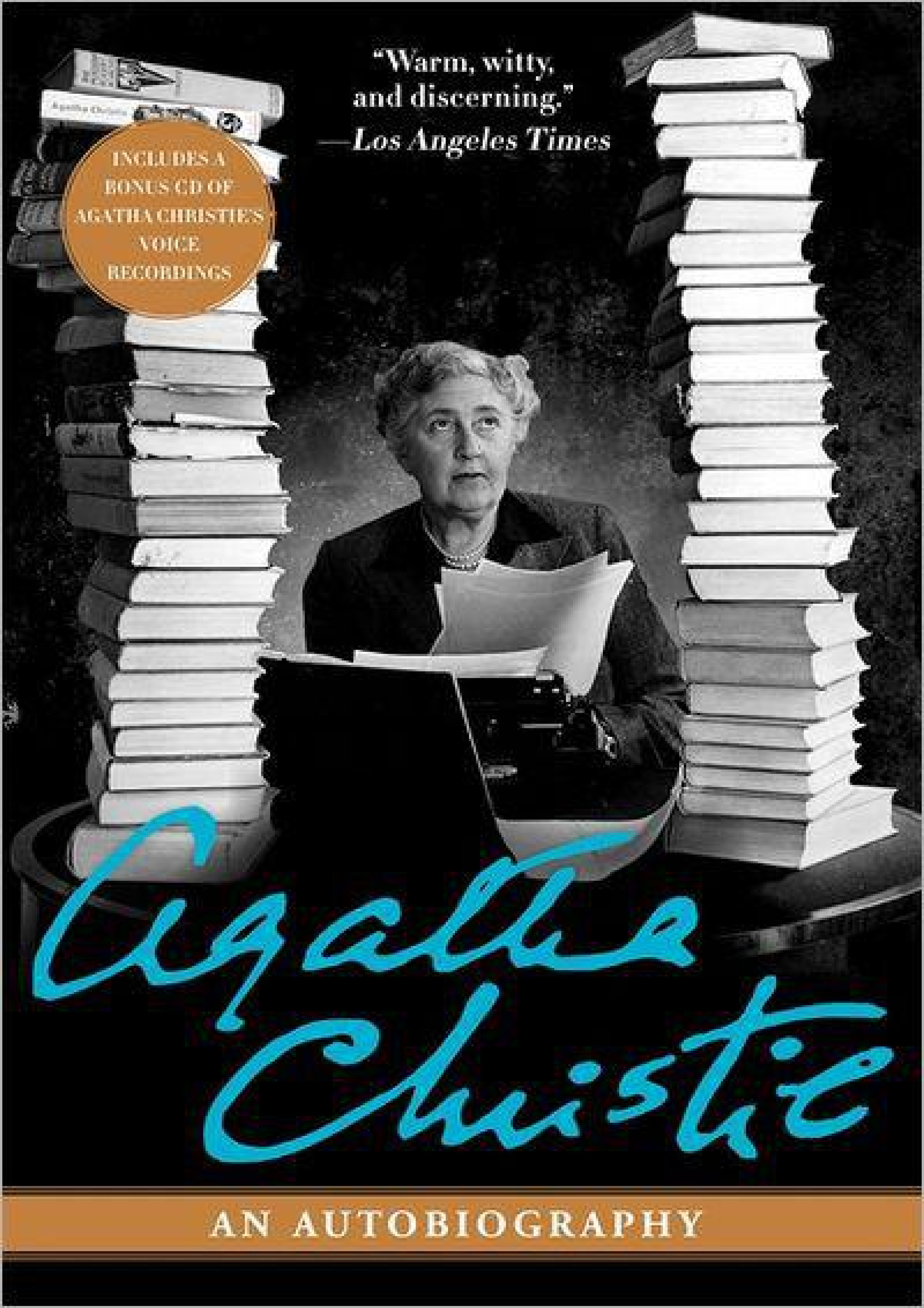
"Warm, witty, and discerning."
—*Los Angeles Times*
INCLUDES A BONUS CD OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S VOICE RECORDINGS
Agatha Christie
AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Agatha Christie

An Autobiography

HarperCollins e-books

Contents

Cover
Preface
Foreword

Part I Ashfield
Part II ‘Girls and Boys Come out to Play’
Part III Growing up
Part IV Flirting, Courting, Banns Up, Marriage
Part V War
Part VI Round the World
Part VII The Land of Lost Content
Part VIII Second Spring
Part IX Life with Max
Part X The Second War
Part XI Autumn

Epilogue
Searchable Terms
About the Author
Copyright
About the Publisher

PREFACE

Agatha Christie began to write this book in April 1950; she finished it some fifteen years later when she was 75 years old. Any book written over so long a period must contain certain repetitions and inconsistencies and these have been tidied up. Nothing of importance has been omitted, however: substantially, this is the autobiography as she would have wished it to appear.

She ended it when she was 75 because, as she put it, 'it seems the right moment to stop. Because, as far as life is concerned, that is all there is to say.' The last ten years of her life saw some notable triumphs–the film of *Murder on the Orient Express;* the continued phenomenal run of *The Mousetrap;* sales of her books throughout the world growing massively year by year and in the United States taking the position at the top of the best-seller charts which had for long been hers as of right in Britain and the Commonwealth; her appointment in 1971 as a Dame of the British Empire. Yet these are no more than extra laurels for achievements that in her own mind were already behind her. In 1965 she could truthfully write…'I am satisfied. I have done what I want to do.'

Though this is an autobiography, beginning, as autobiographies should, at the beginning and going on to the time she finished writing, Agatha Christie has not allowed herself to be too rigidly circumscribed by the strait-jacket of chronology. Part of the delight of this book lies in the way in which she moves as her fancy takes her; breaking off here to muse on the incomprehensible habits of housemaids or the compensations of old age; jumping forward there because some trait in her childlike character reminds her vividly of her grandson. Nor does she feel any obligation to put everything in. A few episodes which to some might seem important–the celebrated disappearance, for example–are not mentioned, though in that particular case the references elsewhere to an earlier attack of amnesia give the clue to the true course of events. As to the rest, 'I have remembered, I suppose, what I wanted to remember', and though she describes her parting from her first husband with moving dignity, what she usually wants to remember are the joyful or the amusing parts of her existence.

Few people can have extraced more intense or more varied fun from life, and this book, above all, is a hymn to the joy of living.

If she had seen this book into print she would undoubtedly have wished to acknowledge many of those who had helped bring that joy into her life; above all, of course, her husband Max and her family. Perhaps it would not be out of place for us, her publishers, to acknowledge *her.* For fifty years she bullied, berated and delighted us; her insistence on the highest standards in every field of publishing was a constant challenge; her good-humour and zest for life brought warmth into our lives. That she drew great pleasure from her writing is obvious from these pages; what does not appear is the way in which she could communicate that pleasure to all those involved with her work, so that to publish her made business ceaselessly enjoyable. It is certain that both as an author and as a person Agatha Christie will remain unique.

FOREWORD

NIMRUD, IRAQ. 2 April 1950.

Nimrud is the modern name of the ancient city of Calah, the military capital of the Assyrians. Our Expedition House is built of mud-brick.

It sprawls out on the east side of the mound, and has a kitchen, a living–and dining-room, a small office, a workroom, a drawing office, a large store and pottery room, and a minute darkroom (we all sleep in tents).

But this year one more room has been added to the Expedition House, a room that measures about three metres square. It has a plastered floor with rush mats and a couple of gay coarse rugs. There is a picture on the wall by a young Iraqi artist, of two donkeys going through the Souk, all done in a maze of brightly coloured cubes. There is a window looking out east towards the snow-topped mountains of Kurdistan. On the outside of the door is affixed a square card on which is printed in cuneiform BEIT AGATHA (Agatha's House).

So this is my 'house' and the idea is that in it I have complete privacy and can apply myself seriously to the business of writing. As the dig proceeds there will probably be no time for this. Objects will need to be cleaned and repaired. There will be photography, labelling, cataloguing and packing. But for the first week or ten days there should be comparative leisure.

It is true that there are certain hindrances to concentration. On the roof overhead, Arab workmen are jumping about, yelling happily to each other and altering the position of insecure ladders. Dogs are barking, turkeys are gobbling. The policeman's horse is clanking his chain, and the window and door refuse to stay shut, and burst open alternately. I sit at a fairly firm wooden table, and beside me is a gaily painted tin box with which Arabs travel. In it I propose to keep my typescript as it progresses.

I *ought* to be writing a detective story, but with the writer's natural urge to write anything but what he should be writing, I long, quite unexpectedly, to write my autobiography. The urge to write one's autobiography, so I have been told, overtakes everyone sooner or later. It has suddenly overtaken me.

On second thoughts, autobiography is much too grand a word. It suggests a purposeful study of one's whole life. It implies names, dates and places in tidy chronological order. What I want is to plunge my hand into a lucky dip and come up with a handful of assorted memories.

Life seems to me to consist of three parts: the absorbing and usually enjoyable present which rushes on from minute to minute with fatal speed; the future, dim and uncertain, for which one can make any number of interesting plans, the wilder and more improbable the better, since–as nothing will turn out as you expect it to do–you might as well have the fun of planning anyway; and thirdly, the past, the memories and realities that are the bedrock of one's present life, brought back suddenly by a scent, the shape of a hill, an old song–some triviality that makes one suddenly say 'I remember…' with a peculiar and quite unexplainable pleasure.

This is one of the compensations that age brings, and certainly a very enjoyable one–to remember.

Unfortunately you often wish not only to remember, but also to *talk* about what you remember. And this, you have to tell yourself repeatedly, is boring for other people. Why should they be interested in what, after all, is *your* life, not theirs? They do, occasionally, when young, accord to you a certain historical curiosity.

'I suppose,' a well-educated girl says with interest, 'that you remember *all* about the Crimea?'

Rather hurt, I reply that I'm not quite as old as that. I also repudiate participation in the Indian Mutiny. But I admit to recollections of the Boer War–I should do, my brother fought in it.

The first memory that springs up in my mind is a clear picture of myself walking along the streets of Dinard on market day with my mother. A boy with a great basket of stuff cannons roughly into me, grazing my arm and nearly knocking me flat. It hurts. I begin to cry. I am, I think, about seven years old.

My mother, who likes stoic behaviour in public places, remonstrates with me.

'Think,' she says, 'of our brave soldiers in South Africa.'

My answer is to bawl out: 'I don't want to be a brave soldier. I want to be a cowyard!'

What governs one's choice of memories? Life is like sitting in a cinema. Flick! Here am I, a child eating éclairs on my birthday. Flick!

Two years have passed and I am sitting on my grandmother's lap, being solemnly trussed up as a chicken just arrived from Mr Whiteley's, and almost hysterical with the wit of the joke.

Just moments–and in between long empty spaces of months or even years. Where was one then? It brings home to one Peer Gynt's question:

'Where was I, myself, the whole man, the true man?'

We never know the whole man, though sometimes, in quick flashes, we know the true man. I think, myself, that one's memories represent those moments which, insignificant as they may seem, nevertheless represent the inner self and oneself as most really oneself.

I am today the same person as that solemn little girl with pale flaxen sausage-curls. The house in which the spirit dwells, grows, develops instincts and tastes and emotions and intellectual capacities, but I myself, the true Agatha, am the same. I do not know the whole Agatha.

The whole Agatha, so I believe, is known only to God.

So there we are, all of us, little Agatha Miller, and big Agatha Miller, and Agatha Christie and Agatha Mallowan proceeding on our way-where? That one doesn't know–which, of course, makes life exciting. I have always thought life exciting and I still do.

Because one knows so little of it–only one's own tiny part–one is like an actor who has a few lines to say in Act I. He has a type-written script with his cues, and that is all he can know. He hasn't read the play. Why should he? His but to say 'The telephone is out of order, Madam' and then retire into obscurity.

But when the curtain goes up on the day of performance, he will hear the play through, and he will be there to line up with the rest, and take his call.

To be part of something one doesn't in the least understand is, I think, one of the most intriguing things about life.

I like living. I have sometimes been wildly despairing, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to *be* alive is a grand thing.

So what I plan to do is to enjoy the pleasures of memory–not hurrying myself-writing a few pages from time to time. It is a task that will probably go on for years. But why do I call it a *task*? It is an indulgence.

I once saw an old Chinese scroll that I loved. It featured an old man sitting under a tree playing cat's cradle. It was called 'Old Man enjoying the pleasures of Idleness.' I've never forgotten it.

So having settled that I'm going to enjoy myself, I had better, perhaps, begin. And though I don't expect to be able to keep up chronological continuity, I can at least try to begin at the beginning.

PART I

ASHFIELD

O! ma chère maison; mon nid, mon gîte
Le passé Vhabite…O ma chère maison

I

One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is to have a happy childhood. I had a very happy childhood. I had a home and a garden that I loved; a wise and patient Nanny; as father and mother two people who loved each other dearly and made a success of their marriage and of parenthood.

Looking back I feel that our house was truly a happy house. That was largely due to my father, for my father was a very agreeable man. The quality of agreeableness Is not much stressed nowadays. People tend to ask if a man is clever, industrious, if he contributes to the well-being of the community, if he 'counts' in the scheme of things. But Charles Dickens puts the matter delightfully in *David Copperfield:*

'Is your brother an agreeable man, Peggotty?' I enquired cautiously.

'Oh what an agreeable man he is!' exclaimed Peggotty.

Ask yourself that question about most of your friends and acquaintances, and you will perhaps be surprised at how seldom your answer will be the same as Peggotty's.

By modern standards my father would probably not be approved of.

He was a lazy man. It was the days of independent incomes, and if you had an independent income you didn't work. You weren't expected to. I strongly suspect that my father would not have been particularly good at working anyway.

He left our house in Torquay every morning and went to his club.

He returned, in a cab, for lunch, and in the afternoon went back to the club, played whist all afternoon, and returned to the house in time to dress for dinner. During the season, he spent his days at the Cricket Club, of which he was President. He also occasionally got up amateur theatricals. He had an enormous number of friends and loved entertaining them. There was one big dinner party at our home every week, and he and my mother went out to dinner usually another two or three times a week.

It was only later that I realized what a much loved man he was. After his death, letters came from all over the world. And locally tradesmen, cabmen, old employees–again and again some old man would come up to me and say: ‘Ah! I remember Mr Miller well. I’ll never forget him.

Not many like him nowadays.’

Yet he had no outstanding characteristics. He was not particularly intelligent. I think that he had a simple and loving heart, and he really cared for his fellow men. He had a great sense of humour and he easily made people laugh. There was no meanness in him, no jealousy, and he was almost fantastically generous. And he had a natural happiness and serenity.

My mother was entirely different. She was an enigmatic and arresting personality–more forceful than my father–startlingly original in her ideas, shy and miserably diffident about herself, and at bottom, I think, with a natural melancholy.

Servants and children were devoted to her, and her lightest word was always promptly obeyed. She would have made a first class educator.

Anything she told you immediately became exciting and significant.

Sameness bored her and she would jump from one subject to another in a way that sometimes made her conversation bewildering. As my father used to tell her, she had no sense of humour. To that accusation she would protest in an injured voice: ‘Just because I don’t think certain stories of yours are funny, Fred…’ and my father would roar with laughter.

She was about ten years younger than my father and she had loved him devotedly ever since she was a child often. All the time that he was a gay young man, flitting about between New York and the South of France, my mother, a shy quiet girl, sat at home, thinking about him, writing an occasional poem in her ‘album,’ embroidering a pocket-book for him.

That pocket-book, incidentally, my father kept all his life.

A typically Victorian romance, but with a wealth of deep feeling behind it.

I am interested in my parents, not only because they *were* my parents, but because they achieved that very rare production, a happy marriage.

Up to date I have only seen four completely successful marriages. Is there a formula for success? I can hardly think so. Of my four examples, one was of a girl of seventeen to a man over fifteen years her senior. He