

AN AGATHA CHRISTIE MYSTERY — NOT WRITTEN BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

a review by Shane Trayers

Nina de Gramont. *The Christie Affair*. St. Martin's Press, 2023.

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NINA DE GRAMONT is the author of seven books, among them *The Last September* (Algonquin Books, 2015) and *Gossip of the Starlings* (Algonquin Books, 2008), as well as novels for a young adult audience such as *Every Little Thing in the World* (Simon and Schuster, 2010), and the short story collection *Of Cats and Men* (Random House, 2008). *The Christie Affair* is a Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick and a *New York Times* Best Seller. The author teaches creative writing at UNC Wilmington.

While Nina de Gramont's *The Christie Affair* has "no allegiance to history" (305), what it accomplishes is creating a novel in the style of Agatha Christie, a twisting and turning mystery underlying the accidental connections between wife and mistress. It is a book about love, betrayal, motherhood, hatred, and vengeance. *The Christie Affair* is a surprising and compelling novel with mystery and murder at its heart.

Though not an accurate historical fiction when it comes to the biography of Agatha Christie and her family, the novel is inspired by the very real eleven days that Agatha Christie went missing in 1926, beginning on December 3rd. She was found on December 14th at a hotel after a large search for the missing author, but the real-life mystery did not end there. Agatha Christie's claim of amnesia suggests that not even the author seems to know what happened during the time of the disappearance. The novel creatively fills in the blanks left by Christie's statements that she had no knowledge of what happened or why she used her husband's mistress's last name as her alias when found. Unlike other speculations about the famous author's unusual disappearance and reappearance, this novel goes beyond filling in possible events. It invents motive, back story, and a more

complicated series of events that include both the fictionalized main character, Nan O'Dea, who fills in for Agatha Christie's husband's real mistress and later second wife Nancy Neele, and the fictionalized Agatha Christie character.

The novel anticipates our immediate dislike of Agatha Christie's husband's mistress. As Nan O'Dea tells us, "Perhaps you're finding it difficult to feel kindly toward a home-wrecker such as me. But I don't require your affection" (28). Yet, after this statement we begin a cleverly interwoven bildungsroman of Nan's life, including time spent with family in Ireland. A reader would be hard-pressed not to find empathy and compassion for someone who has lived through tragic times and life events. The transformation from "homewrecker" to heroine allows readers to rid themselves of any inherent dislike for the main character — particularly appropriate when the main character is a completely fictionalized historical figure with a different name than the historical mistress.

Ironically, the parts of this novel that are not about the Christie family have the most sense of historical veracity. Since this is a mystery, it is impossible to mention which characters are involved in this section of the novel without giving away



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integral plot, but one example is the novel's description of a Magdalene Laundry, also called Magdalene Asylum, in Ireland where women who were pregnant and unmarried were confined. One character in the novel ends up here. Conditions in these laundries were horrific, but many of the atrocities did not come to light until recently. *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), a fictionalized film based on true stories, depicted the harsh conditions, including women doing hard labor up until birth and then years afterward to pay off their "debt," not being able to leave of their own volition, and sometimes not at all because unmarked graves were found at many of these institutions. *The Christie Affair's* depiction of the lack of food, harsh conditions, no fair pay

for work, and mistreatment of women matches the general stories of the survivors.

Additionally, these institutions adopted out babies, sometimes selling them for money, and there are claims that they did this without the mother's consent as is depicted in *The Christie Affair*. Philomena Lee's search for her son became public knowledge when Martin Sixsmith published *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee: A Mother, Her Son and a Fifty-Year Search* (2010). A movie, *Philomena* (2013), later dramatized her incarceration in the Magdalene Laundry where her son was stolen from her and adopted to a family in America without her permission. *The Christie Affair* takes the scant information available about the conditions for mothers and babies

and envisions what it must have been like to be incarcerated there in a way that rings true for the very real stories of the women who suffered and is thus in line with these other Magdalene stories.

The novel depicts post-World War I well, too, from the jubilant celebrations in the streets in England as the war ended, to the hoarse voice of someone who was exposed to mustard gas, to the psychological and physical traumas men came home with. Also, the way that one character is described when afflicted with Spanish Flu, which really did accompany many men home at the end of the war, is historically accurate, as well as the high death rate mentioned tangentially in the novel.

Without giving too many clues to the overarching mystery, by the end of the novel, the speculative history takes over the main storyline as the fictional Nan O'Dea's life collides with Agatha Christie's disappearance, and the novel shows us a story that is likely more interesting than reality, one that diverges from known Agatha Christie biography. Yet, it is a story that respects Christie's life and work through the telling of a clever, twisting murder mystery, grounded in the true horrors of the time period, especially for women, reminiscent of an Agatha Christie novel. ■

"As readers our minds do reach toward the longed-for conclusions, despite what we know to be true. . . . This story belongs to me. I hold no allegiance to history, which has never done me a single favor." (305)

ABOVE Nina de Gramont reading at an event hosted by The Country Bookshop at the Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities, Southern Pines, NC, 13 Feb. 2023