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PENGUIN ACTIVE READING

LEVEL 4

The ABC Murders

Agatha Christie



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at's the book about?

Answer the questions.

- 1 Agatha Christie is world-famous for her crime stories. List people, things and events that you expect to read about in a crime story. Then compare your list with the lists of other students. Do you agree?

..... *police officers*

.....

.....

- 2 Have you read any other books by Agatha Christie, or seen any films or plays of her stories? If you have, explain what the crime was and why it was difficult for the detective to solve the case – but don't tell other students how the case was solved! If you haven't, find information about Agatha Christie's work on the Internet. Which titles do you recognise?
- 3 Why do you think this story is called *The ABC Murders*?

What happens first?

- 1 Describe the two men in the picture. What do you think the relationship between them is?

- a old friends
b old enemies
c teacher and student
d brothers

- 2 What year do you think it is?

- a 2005
b 1970
c 1935
d 1900



- 3 Now read the title of Chapter 1 and the words in italics below it. How do you think the men in the picture above feel about the letter?

- a pleased b uninterested c worried d angry

The Letter

Mr Hercule Poirot, You think you are very clever at solving mysteries that are too difficult for our poor, stupid British police.

My name is Captain Arthur Hastings. My wife and I have a large farm in South America, but before I was married I lived in London. There I helped my friend, the famous Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, solve many crimes.

Poirot used to work with the police in Belgium, but he **retired** several years ago. Since retiring, though, he has become a very successful private detective. When the British police have a difficult crime which they cannot solve, they often ask Poirot to help them.

In June 1935 I came back to Britain for six months on business while my wife stayed in South America to manage the farm. I didn't know that, during that time, I was going to work with my old friend Poirot again.

Most of this story is my own personal experience. Sometimes, though, I have included information about events when I was not present myself. But I believe I have described the thoughts and feelings of the other people in the story correctly. Poirot has seen my work, and agrees that I have.

In my opinion, Poirot used his skills in a most clever and unusual way to solve a number of crimes which were different from any others that he had worked on. I shall call these crimes the ABC Murders.

After arriving in England, I went almost immediately to visit Poirot. He had moved to a new flat in London and was very pleased to see me.

'You're looking wonderful, Poirot,' I said. 'You haven't aged at all. In fact, if it were possible, I would say that you have fewer grey hairs than the last time I saw you.'

Poirot smiled. 'And why is that not possible? It is quite true.'

'Do you mean your hair is turning from grey to black instead of from black to grey?' I said in surprise. 'That's very strange. It seems against nature.'

'As usual, Hastings,' said Poirot, 'you have a beautiful and **unsuspicious** mind. You have not changed over the years. You notice a strange fact and explain it in the same breath without noticing that you are doing so!'

Poirot walked into his bedroom and returned with a bottle in his hand. I looked at it, then I understood. It was a bottle of black hair colouring.

'Poirot!' I cried. 'You've coloured your hair!'

retire /rɪ'taɪə/ (v) to stop working, usually because you are too old to work
suspicious /sə'spiʃəs/ (adj) thinking that something is wrong. If you *suspect* someone (a *suspect*), you think they may be guilty of a crime.

— h, you begin to understand!’ said Poirot.

‘I suppose next time I come home, I shall find you wearing a false moustache – or are you wearing one now?’

Poirot looked shocked. He has a large black moustache which he is very proud of.

‘No, no, *mon ami**. A false moustache! How horrible!’ He pulled his moustache to prove to me that it was real. ‘I have never seen a moustache like mine in the whole of London.’

That was a very good thing, I thought privately. But I didn’t want to hurt Poirot’s feelings, so instead I changed the subject.

‘Are you still working?’ I asked. ‘I know you actually retired years ago.’

‘Yes, it is true,’ replied Poirot. ‘I tried to grow vegetables instead. But immediately, a murder happened – and I had to forget about the vegetables. And since then, whenever I say that a **case** will be my last, it is not. Each time I say: this is the end. But then something else happens. But I must say, my friend, that I do not like retirement at all. If I do not use my brain, it will stop working.’

‘I see,’ I said. ‘So you still use your brain sometimes.’

‘Exactly. But I choose my cases very carefully. You know, Hastings, in many ways I think you bring me luck.’

‘Really?’ I said. ‘In what ways?’

‘As soon as I heard you were coming, I said to myself: something will happen. Hastings and I will hunt criminals again together, just like the old days. But if so, it must not be ordinary business. It must be something’ – he waved his hands excitedly – ‘something very fine and special.’

‘Well,’ I said at last, smiling, ‘has this excellent crime happened yet?’

‘*Pas encore*†. At least – ’ Poirot paused, and a look of worry came over his face. His voice sounded so strange that I looked at him in surprise.

Suddenly he crossed the room to a desk near the window. There were papers arranged carefully inside. He took one out, then passed it to me.

‘Tell me, *mon ami*,’ he said. ‘What do you think of this?’

I took it from him with interest. It was a letter which had been typed on thick white notepaper:

Mr Hercule Poirot, You think you are very clever at solving mysteries that are too difficult for our poor, stupid British police. Let us see, Mr Clever Poirot, just how clever you can be. Perhaps you’ll find this problem too difficult. Watch out for Andover, on the 21st of the month.

Yours, A B C

* *mon ami*: French for ‘my friend’

† *pas encore*: French for ‘not yet’

case /keɪs/ (n) an event, or events, that the police or detectives are trying to learn more about



I looked at the envelope. The address was typed, too.

‘The postmark is London WC1,’ said Poirot. ‘Well, what is your opinion?’

I handed the letter back to him.

‘It’s from a madman, I suppose,’ I said.

‘That is all you can say?’

‘Well – doesn’t it sound like a madman to you?’

‘Yes, my friend, it does.’

His voice was serious. I looked at him in surprise.

‘You’re worried, Poirot.’

‘A madman, *mon ami*, is a serious matter. A madman is a very dangerous thing.’

British English

Contemporary

Hercule Poirot has received a letter which is simply signed 'ABC'. The writer promises a mystery that is too difficult even for the great mind of the famous Belgian detective. Poirot is worried by the letter, but there seems to be no case to solve. And then the murders begin.

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