

The dentist in works of fiction. Notes on the detective novels of Georges Simenon and Agatha Christie

Le dentiste dans des œuvres de fiction. Remarques sur les romans policiers de Georges Simenon et Agatha Christie

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Key words

- ◆ Detective novels
- ◆ Dentists
- ◆ Christie
- ◆ Simenon
- ◆ Liège

Mots-clés

- ◆ Romans policiers
- ◆ Dentistes
- ◆ Christie
- ◆ Simenon
- ◆ Liège

Abstract

Dentists have their uses for authors of fiction. As members of the professional middle class they are assumed to be honest, reliable, reasonably prosperous, and perhaps somewhat dull - "Des gens qui ont une maison confortable, une vie familiale une profession honorable"(1). So that when in real life or fiction something goes seriously wrong, and a dentist is revealed as a criminal, it is somehow more shocking. Alternatively, because of their known place in the community, and the fact that dentists generally keep regular hours in their surgeries, the dentist can be used by an author needing a fixed reference in Society, a fixed reference to place, or a fixed point in time. This brief piece describes how two authors, Georges Simenon, a Belgian from Liège, whose detective is French, and Agatha Christie, an English author whose detective is Belgian, have used dentists in their fiction.

Résumé

Les dentistes tiennent une certaine place dans les œuvres de fictions. Au sein de la classe moyenne, ils sont supposés être honnêtes, fiables, relativement prospères, et peut-être quelque peu ennuyeux (1). De sorte que, quand, dans la vie réelle ou dans la fiction quelque chose va très mal, et qu'un dentiste s'avère être un criminel, ce n'en est que plus choquant. Cette courte présentation montre comment Georges Simenon, auteur belge, de Liège, dont le détective, Maigret, est Français, et Agatha Christie, auteur anglais, dont le détective, Hercule Poirot, est Belge, ont présenté les dentistes.

Note

The discussion avoids giving a synopsis of any of the eight books or short stories discussed. The novels of both authors are readily available, and even a hint of who might be a victim, and who a murderer, destroys the pleasure of reading detective novels.

The authors

Dame Agatha Christie (Lady Mallowan) (1890-1976), born in Torquay, England. 'BCBG'. Mostly home educated, but from 15 attended school and finishing school in Paris. Took a diploma from the Apothecaries Hall.

Georges Joseph Christian Simenon (1903-1989), born in Liège, Belgium. At 16 he was apprenticed to a pastry chef, and at 17

started as an assistant night police reporter with the Liège Gazette.

The authors and their creations present contrasts in personality, contrast in method, and possible contrast in readership

At the core of Simenon's, and therefore Maigret's philosophy is a deep interest in people and their motivation. In *Maigret et les vieillards* Simenon quotes Richard Fox, who, writing in *The Lancet* in 1960 had said that "a wise psychiatrist relying on scientific knowledge and the experience of his consulting room, is quite well placed to understand men. Nevertheless, it is possible that he understands them less well than a novelist or even a police officer" (2). In marked contrast, the fictional Captain Hastings, who had first been inspired by Poirot when they had met in Belgium before the great War, sums up Poirot's working principle as being simply procedural, that it was enough just to have method (3). So for Simenon/Maigret, the question is always Pourquoi? Why? Maigret, who had spent two years at medical school in Nantes, allowed himself valua-

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ble self-analysis, musing once that he had in fact never intended to become a doctor, but rather, as a policeman, aimed to follow the example of intelligent and understanding men who, like a priest or doctor, would get beneath the skin of men, and by doing so shape their destinies (4). For Christie/Poirot, on the other hand, the important question is always Who? Followed closely by How? And Christie was writing for an English readership who wanted to look at victims and detectives (Poirot is an exception to the 'milord' detective) who were living lives very different in class and prosperity from their own.

The detectives

Jules Amédée François Maigret, born in 1887 in Saint-Fiacre near Moulins in the Allier department. Lives at 132, 3rd floor, Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, Paris, with his wife Louise. A medical student for two years (école de médecine de Nantes, alma mater of Laennec). Joined the police aged 22. Retired aged 55 to Meung-sur-Loire. First case 1913.

Hercule Poirot born in 1870, near Spa. In London, by 1916. Unmarried, lives at Flat 203, 56B Whitehaven Mansions London W1. His close friend is captain Arthur Hastings, and his secretary is Miss Felicity Lemon. Police detective in Belgium before the first war, refugee in England from 1914. First English case as a private detective 1916. Dead about 1950.

A Liège connection

As Michael Clapp, Isabelle Leponce and Pierre Baré established just last year (2014), Agatha Christie met in Torquay a Belgian "Brigadier de Gendarmerie", Jacques Joseph Hamoir, a refugee from Herstal (5). As she says in her autobiography (without naming Hamoir), when she was looking around Torquay for characters, why not make her detective a refugee Belgian police officer? (6) And Poirot was born, fully formed down to the moustache. Further detail is provided in her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* which describes how Captain Hasting had come to first know and then re-meet Poirot. (7) Hamoir's address in the Rue Large Voie was only 5 Km further up the Meuse from the house where Simenon was born, at 26, rue Léopold. The Rue Large Voie was certainly close enough in time and place for Hamoir as a local policeman to have been aware of Guillaume Brüll, when Simenon's maternal grandfather lived at 187, rue Saint-Léonard, Liège, and his uncle François lived at Quatre Tourettes, 525 (today 535), rue Saint-Léonard. (8) (And not at the Tour Pépin at the far end, which Simenon identifies in *Pedigree*) (9). Poirot himself had at least one detective case in Liège, as he recalls in *Hickory Dickory Dock* (10).

Agatha Christie's own dentist

Agatha Christie spells the name of her childhood dentist Hearn, but there is no record of a dentist of that name in any possible location (11), and it is most likely that the Miller (Christie née Miller) family dentist was William Hern OBE MRCS LDS. It was customary for the 'carriage trade' to visit London to see their dentists, as Christie notes in passing in her 'Miss Marple' novel *The Moving Finger*, and Hern's surgery was at 7, Stratford Place, Oxford Street (fig. 1) (The Blue Plaque records that the 8th American President Martin van Buren once lived there).

Hern was one of the most eminent dentists of his time. At the turn of the century he was an active campaigner for a Dental Degree to be awarded by the University of London (12). Later, in the Great War, he acted as a dental surgeon at the 3rd London General Hospital with William Warwick James, work-



Fig.1. 7, Stratford Place, Oxford Street. (The Blue Plaque records that the 8th American President Martin van Buren once lived there)

ing on facial reconstruction, for which work he was awarded an OBE by the King in 1920.

Poirot's own dentist

Poirot attended his dentist Mr. Morley routinely twice a year at his surgery at '58 Queen Charlotte Street', London, which may well have been based on Hern's surgery at 7 Stratford Place. Unmarried, Morley lived with his sister on the top storey, with his surgery on the second floor. His younger partner Reilly had his surgery on the first floor, and the waiting room was on the ground floor. Morley's dental nurse is Gladys Nevill, and a page-boy Alfred opens the front door and brings patients in the lift to the surgeries.

Maigret's and Mme Maigret's own dentists

In *Maigret se défend* (1964), Maigret talks of Dr. Ajoupa 'Our dentist'. Previously, Mme Maigret had had trouble with her teeth, and on the recommendation of a friend, saw Dr Floresco, a Rumanian dentist, in *L'amie de Madame Maigret*, (1950). His surgery was on the third floor of a building on the corner of the Rue Turgot and Avenue Trudaine, opposite the Place d'Anvers. Although he is not named, it is presumably again Floresco whom she is seeing in *Un échec de Maigret* (1956). Although blessed with good teeth, in the course of his enquiries Maigret consulted François Mélan in *Maigret se défend*.

Keeping a sense of proportion

The oldest and best friends of Commissaire and Mme Maigret are Doctor and Mrs Pardon, with whom they dine once a month (13) and in 2003 Christian Regnier noted that no fewer than 327 doctors can be identified in the works of Simenon (14). Maigret made clear in his Memoires how important the medical profession was, as representing almost a holy calling, even if it was not the one for him. In marked contrast to the plentiful supply of doctors in the 75 stories and 28 short stories published between 1931 and 1972 in which Jules Maigret appears (15), I have identified only six in which dentistry plays a more or less important role. It is possible that I have missed some, as I can not claim to have read all 75.

Christie published fewer books than Simenon, and as seen in occasional references to the medical profession elsewhere in her writing (16,17), she was certainly not as enamoured of doctors as 'Maigret', but of necessity in detective novels they make very frequent appearances. Hercule Poirot appeared in around 45 books or short stories between 1920 and 1975. From these I have identified just two novels, and one short story which involve dentists, and one brief mention of what might be termed forensic odontology. If, in these stories, dentists or dentistry are of importance, it has to be admitted that in the whole compass of the works of these two authors, dentists can not be said to play any large part compared with doctors.

The Detective stories, with Poirot and Maigret and dentists, written by Christie and Simenon (fig. 2)

1. *The Cornish Mystery (Le mystère des Cornouailles)* (1923)

Dentist: Edward Pengelly 'Polgarwith'.

Dental nurse: Miss Marks

Torquay was the birthplace of Agatha Christie and she lived there before her marriage. It was there that in 1914 she played the piano for the Belgian refugees (including Hamoir), and it fits well enough with the town where the dentist Pengelly has his house and his surgery.

2. *Death in the Clouds (La mort dans les nuages)* (1935)

Dentist: Norman Gale. Shepherd's Avenue, Muswell Hill, London.

In Paris to see the latest instruments.

Handsome, he provides the 'love interest'.

Assists Poirot.

Mise en Scène

In murder mysteries, the convention of the closed community is a strong one. Here, Agatha Christie conjures up one of the best to be found in detective novels; the rear passenger cabin of a plane en route from le Bourget to Croydon.

The 'Prometheus' is a Handley -Page H.P. 42 of Imperial Airways. These aircraft entered service in 1930, and although

slow, (Cruising speed 100 m.p.h) by 1936, each H.P. 42 had flown 1,000,000 miles carrying 100 000 passengers without mishap.

3. *Jeumont, 51 minutes d'arrêt!* (Histoire courte 1936/8)

The dentists

Passengers travelling first class from Berlin, (via Liège); "On account of an International Congress of Dentistry opening the following day in Paris*. We have at least twenty-five..."

*cf. 8th Congrès dentaire international, Paris, 2-8 August 1931

Mise en scène

In this short story, Simenon also presents the reader with travellers in a closed community, in this case a German carriage with seats of red velour. Maigret, summoned to help his nephew, gathers the passengers in their original seats in the first-class compartment as they were when the murder took place. There are six passengers where more usually four might have been expected, and this is put down to the pressure on space imposed by the 'invasion' of dentists. A sign of Simenon's precise attention to detail in his narrative, but is he perhaps also taking a slight dig at dentists - so many, and all travelling first class?

4. *The Patriotic Murders or; One, Two, Buckle my Shoe (Un, deux, trois...)* (1940)

The dentists

Dentist 1: Mr Henry Morley (Poirot's own Dentist)

Dental Nurse: Miss Gladys Nevill

Residence: '58 Queen Charlotte Street'. London.

Surgery; '58 Queen Charlotte Street'. London. Probably modeled on 7, Stratford Place.

Dentist 2: Reilly, Partner/Assistant to Morley.

Mise en scène

The surgery of Poirot's dentist is the 'closed community' in which the murder takes place. Patients' Dental records are important to the story, and particular interest is added by the use of a dental material as a murder weapon.

5. *Four and Twenty Blackbirds (Le mort avait les dents blanches)* 1940

Forensic odontology

In this short story, only medical men feature, and it is the observation of teeth by Poirot, rather than the appearance of a dentist that is important for the dénouement.

Mise en scène

Even though Agatha Christie names the restaurant in London's King's Road, where Poirot dines regularly with a friend, the Gallant Endeavour, mention of the 'special table' where the real Augustus John (the artist and brother of Gwen John, Rodin's muse) regularly sits with his friends, sets this tale in the old Queens Restaurant which used to be off Sloane Square and Kings' Road, Chelsea.

6. *Mon ami Maigret (My Friend Maigret)* (1949)

Dentist

'Léon'. Lives on the island of Porquerolles,

Les Romans Policiers, avec Poirot et Maigret et les dentistes, écrit par Christie et Simenon.

1.1923 *The Cornish Mystery (Le mystère des Cornouailles)* ✪

2.1935 *Death in the Air (La mort dans les nuages)* ✪

3.1936 *Jeumont, 51 minutes d'arrêt!* (Histoire courte) ✪

4.1940 *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe (Un, deux, trois...)* ✪

5.1940 *Four and Twenty Blackbirds, (Le mort avait les dents blanches)* ✪

6.1949 *Mon ami Maigret (My Friend Maigret)* ✪

7.1950 *L'amie de madame Maigret. (Madame Maigret's Friend)* ✪

8.1951 *Maigret et la grande perche. (Maigret and the Beanpole)* ✪

9.1956 *Un échec de Maigret (Maigret's failure)* ✪

10.1964 *Maigret se défend (Maigret on the defensive).* ✪

Fig.2. The detective novels and short stories of Christie and Simenon featuring dentists or dentistry

His practice used to be in Bordeaux.
 An expert boules player.
 A suspect for the reader to consider.
 Mise en scène

At least two English critics, Henry Keating (18) and Simon Mason (19) have considered this to be one of Simenon's best 'Maigrets' (and in the case of Keating one of the 100 best detective stories). Here the semi-closed community is made up of the residents of, and visitors to, the island of Porquerolles.

7. *L'amie de madame Maigret (Madame Maigret's Friend)* 1950.

Dentist: Dr Floresco. Rumanian
 Surgery on the third floor on the corner of the Rue Turgot and Avenue Trudaine, opposite the Place d'Anvers.
 His professional reputation, with his gentle touch, is very high.
 Mise en scène

In this story there is no closed community. Dr. Floresco, who is to be seen at work through his window, does not play an active part, but the situation of his surgery opposite the Place d'Anvers is the key to the narrative, as Mme Maigret waits in the park for her regular 11 o'clock appointment. Another point of particular interest in the story is the crucial part played by forensic odontology, with the identification of two human teeth in a furnace, all that remains of a victim.

8. *Maigret et la grande perche (Maigret and the Burglar's Wife or Maigret and the Beanpole)* (1951)

Dentist: Guillaume Serre. Age 50. Lives in Paris at 43 bis, rue de la Ferme, Neuilly, with his mother and two wives (in succession!) His surgery is at the same address. Although gentle as a dentist, it can not be said that he was popular with his domestic staff, the housekeeper referring to both him and his mother as 'punaises' - 'bugs'

Mise en scène and setting a time as much as the place
 The story is of additional interest, because the toothache of a neighbour serves to fix the time and date of Serre's car leaving his house. It is the second example of quiet, ironic humour in this story, the circumstances of Maigret's meeting many years before, as a young officer, with 'La Grande Perche' being the first, and this, the dentist possible caught out by a toothache, being the second.

9. *Un échec de Maigret (Maigret's failure)*. 1956

Dentist: Not named, but we can take it that Mme Maigret's dentist is still Dr. Floresco.

Mise en scène

Why? At the heart of this story is less the account of the murder, more Simenon's account of Maigret's state of mind, and of Maigret's self-examination as he goes over the affair. Mme Maigret's aching teeth have proved difficult to treat, and have led to sleepless nights at 132 Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, and a grumpy Superintendent Maigret who has had to get his own lunch. His bad temper sets the mood of the novel.

10. *Maigret se défend (Maigret on the defensive)*, 1964 and *La patience de Maigret (The patience of Maigret)* 1965

Dentists: François Mélan, Stomatologist /dentist. Age 38
 Lives and has his surgery in a private house at 32 bis, rue des Acacias.

Professeur Vivier, Stomatologist

Dr. Ajoupa 'our dentist'

Mélan's dental nurse/secretary; Mlle Motte who lives in the rue des Francs-Bourgeois.

Mise en scène

Maigret se défend is the second Maigret novel (La Grande Perche the first) in which a dentist plays a central role. (La patience de Maigret is mentioned as a sequel, but by then the dentist plays no part, although getting a mention). Mélan's personality is fully developed, and his surgery in his house, with its own garden, faces a flat where Maigret is a frequent visitor. The real Rue des Acacias (though not at «32 bis») has just such a site, where a block of flats faces a house which seems to have its own garden. (Google Earth)

A Graphic analysis of the books

Analysis of detective novels is necessarily subjective, and these basic charts (there is no allowance for more than one dentist per novel) offered here can not reflect everyone's opinion, they are intended rather to give a framework for discussion, preferably to be used after the novel(s) have been read so that, as said in the earlier note, the suspense of the reading experience is not broken. (fig. 3, 4)

Dentiste:	Christie	Simenon
Nommé.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Lieu de pratique donnée / importante.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Haut standing professionnel.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Bonne réputation auprès des publics / patients.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Faible réputation auprès du public / patients.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Marié.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Célibataire.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
La position sociale pertinente.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Infirmière dentaire bonne relation.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Infirmière relation dentaire peut-être trop près.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Caractère donné une description complète, et la personnalité.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
«Amour intérêt».....	●●●●●	●●●●●

Fig. 3 Graphic Analysis part 1

Dentiste:	Christie	Simenon
Meurtrier ou tueur.....	●	●
Complicité de meurtre.....	●	●
Victime.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Un suspect dans l'affaire.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Un suspect dans la pensée du lecteur.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Dentiste essentiel de l'intrigue.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Profession dentaire essentiel de l'intrigue.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Décès résultant d'erreur professionnelle.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Assassiner par un instrument dentaire.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
Odontologie médico-légale.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
valide.....	●●●●●	●●●●●
trompeur.....	●●●●●	●●●●●

Fig. 4. Graphic Analysis part 2

Conclusion

As dentists, no less than as individuals, we each have several existences, our home life, our professional life, our own view of ourselves and our lives as they are seen by others. It is a nostalgic and gentle pleasure to seek out the opinions of the laity on the subject of our profession by researching the rare appearances of dentists and dentistry in literature.

The last Word

The last word can be permitted to commissaire Jules Maigret ; "*La vérité ne paraît jamais vraie*". (*Truth never appears true*) (20)

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Appendix: Dentists in Simenon's 'Romans durs', and some of Christie's other novels

Simenon also uses dentists in his Romans Durs (sometimes as major figures, in *Le Confessionnal* for example), so it is not surprising to find dentists and dentistry featuring in his detective novels.

Agatha Christie mentions dentists in her works, but in a less significant way than Simenon. (At least we know from her autobiography that she thought well of the profession, and particularly of the childhood dentist Mr Hearn).

Simenon's "Romans Durs", and the detective novels without Maigret, which mention dentists, however briefly

1941 *Bergelon*
 1944 *Le Rapport du Gendarme*
 1948 *Pedigree (Autobiographical)*
 1948 *La neige était sale*
 1950 *L'enterrement de Monsieur Bouvet*
 1958 *Strip-Tease*
 1961 *Betty*
 1962 *La Porte*
 1966 *Le Confessionnal (Hero is the son of a dentist)*
 1968 *La Prison (Chirurgien-dentiste)*
 1971 *La disparition d'Odile*

In his writings Simenon may make the dentist a key person, or may just make a passing mention of dentistry, but in either case the reader is aware that the inclusion of the profession is not accidental.

Looking back at the 'Précis' given at the start of the presentation, one can say that for Simenon the employment of characters and characterization is that of a master of composition and of the art of the writer.

Dentists or dentistry in some of the other novels of Agatha Christie

1930 *The Murder at the Vicarage*.
 1934 *The Listerdale Mystery*.
 1942 *The Body in the Library*.
 1943 *The Moving Finger*.
 1943 *Five Little Pigs*.
 1956 *The Burden*.
 1961 *The Pale Horse*.

1970 *Passenger to Frankfurt*.

Christie bears no comparison with Simenon in her use of dentistry outside her Poirot novels.

Except in the case of *Passenger to Frankfurt* and *The Body in the Library* mentions of dentistry could be omitted without in any way interrupting the narrative of the stories in which they appear. A brief mention of William Beveridge, 'father' of the National Health Service (1) is to be found in *Passenger to Frankfurt*. She also shows awareness of the controversial practical application of the 'Focal Infection' (2) theory in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, a Miss Marple mystery of 1930 - doctors who take out all your teeth, then say sorry it was appendicitis all along. The body in the Library is of interest, since the denouement in part rests on an orthodontic observation of the victims. Although *Five Little Pigs* is a Poirot story, dentistry is only mentioned in the context of the innate truthfulness of a character who warns that dentists may hurt. Each snapshot is nevertheless of value to the dental historian, however trivial it may be, taken altogether they give a helpful view of dentistry, and of how dentists were perceived in society at the time Christie was writing.

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Acknowledgements

David Hillam as co-presenter, Helen Nield at the library of the British Dental Association, Carolyn Nield, genealogist, for details of William Hern, and Polly Bishop for her library of Agatha Christie novels.

