

REF Impact Case Study Template

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| Institution: Solent University | |
| Unit of Assessment : 34 | |
| Title of case study | Agatha Christie: Widening knowledge and understanding of the world's best-selling novelist |
| Author | Dr Mark Aldridge |
| 1. Summary of the Impact (around 100 words) | |
| <p>Solent research has impacted on the public understanding of one of the world's best loved, and often misunderstood, writers. At a time when Agatha Christie's writing is more popular than ever - as demonstrated by on-going film and television productions from the BBC, Amazon, Disney and 20th Century Fox - this impact case study shows how the research has impacted and informed public discourse/understanding concerning these works. This impact is a direct result of Dr Aldridge's status as a research specialist, advisor and contributor to those working on Agatha Christie projects. Dr Aldridge assists and advises on public events and both creates and engages with a significant amount of international discussion of Agatha Christie (in particular screen adaptations of her work) through his talks, interviews, and a new mainstream research-based publication which forms a centrepiece of the official celebrations marking a century since the publication of Christie's first book.</p> | |
| 2. Underpinning Research (around 500 words) | |
| <p>Dr Mark Aldridge (Senior Lecturer at Solent University, 2007-present) first published research on Agatha Christie in 2012. Research into film and television adaptations of Agatha Christie then led to his first monograph <i>Agatha Christie on Screen</i>, published in 2016 by Palgrave Macmillan. This original research was extensively based on archival material, principally that held by international archives at the University of Exeter, Margaret Herrick Archive (Los Angeles), Library of Congress (Washington DC) and the Agatha Christie family's own collection. The book was very well received, including by the foremost journal covering this area, <i>The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television</i>, but also readers of Agatha Christie, as well as both Agatha Christie Ltd. and the Christie estate. This inspired further research and the writing of a second book that would appeal to a mainstream readership as well as scholars.</p> <p>Having established a good relationship with Agatha Christie Ltd and the Agatha Christie family (principally her only grandchild, Mathew Prichard, retired chair of Agatha Christie Ltd.), Dr Aldridge has continued to undertake and disseminate research, with a special emphasis on archival material that has received little or no attention. He is often called upon to speak to the media or participate in public events that discuss and celebrate Christie, as he is the main expert internationally when it comes to adaptations of her work. Following the success of the first monograph, several opportunities arose for Dr Aldridge to continue his work and share the results of his research.</p> <p>As a result of these speaking and publishing opportunities, Dr Aldridge has built a reputation as an expert, enabling him to undertake and disseminate further research. This has included creating, delivering and chairing talks at a variety of events, and writing an introduction to the reissue of a Christie-related book (<i>The Passing of Mr Quinn</i>) that Christie's publisher, HarperCollins, had been unaware of before Dr Aldridge discussed its significance during an event they attended. This working relationship led to an even more significant commission from HarperCollins for a new 'official' book for a mainstream audience published to coincide with one hundred years of Christie's detective Poirot. Dr Aldridge's book, <i>Agatha Christie's Poirot: The Greatest Detective in the World</i>, packages the original research that he has undertaken, including a wealth of unpublished material, into a book appropriate for a wide readership. During the course of the research its scope was expanded due to full access to the archives of HarperCollins, where much material about and by Christie resides, given that it has been her publisher since 1926. The result coincided with the detective's centenary, and Kenneth</p> | |

Branagh's second (subsequently postponed) Poirot film, *Death on the Nile*. This book is officially licensed by both Agatha Christie Ltd. and the Christie family trust, which has helped it gain good exposure in the publicity surrounding these events, and is the official publication for the celebrations. Early feedback has been extremely positive (4.7/5 on amazon.co.uk) and has inspired a great deal of interest in Dr Aldridge's research.

3. References to the Research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. ALDRIDGE, M., 2020. *Agatha Christie's Poirot: The Greatest Detective in the World*. London: HarperCollins
2. ALDRIDGE, M., 2017. 'Introduction' in: *The Passing of Mr Quinn*. London: HarperCollins
3. ALDRIDGE, M., 2016-. *Agatha Christie on Screen* [website]
www.agathachristieonscreen.com
4. ALDRIDGE, M., 2016. *Agatha Christie on Screen*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
5. ALDRIDGE, M., 2012. 'Love, Crime and Agatha Christie' in: Ritzenhoff and Randell (eds.) *Screening the Dark Side of Love*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
6. CHAPMAN, L., 2018. *Agatha Christie on Screen* [review] in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01439685.2017.1381359>

4. Details of the Impact (750 words)

Impact on understanding and appreciation of Christie's works

Although conceived and executed as a research monograph, Dr Aldridge's book *Agatha Christie on Screen* (2016) has received acclaim from Christie fans and the wider public, as well as scholars. It has garnered positive reviews from both the public (4.5/5 on amazon.co.uk) and from critics which show how the book has impacted on appreciation and understanding of Christie's work:

- "Whether established scholar, student or general reader, there is something included in this book for everyone [. . . .] it is an excellent example of how to balance scholarship with accessibility for both academic and general readers." Llewella Chapman, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* [5.4]
- "Mark Aldridge, with his unique access to Christie archives, has unearthed a treasure trove of details that make Agatha Christie more alive to me than before." Amazon reviewer [5.2].
- "[Aldridge] introduced me to a number of productions I was not aware of and he has also given me a strong need to watch more of Christie's stage productions. It was great to see behind the scenes of adaptations and to see what went into making them and I have a much greater idea of what the adapting process is like." *Cross Examining Crime* [5.3].

Newspapers and magazines have frequently contacted Dr Aldridge to discuss the book and interview him about new Agatha Christie adaptations. This has led to appearances in *The New York Times*, *The Times* (which branded Dr Aldridge 'the Agathologist'), *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times* and the *Radio Times* (amongst other publications) as well as popular websites such as *Digital Spy*, where his research has been explicitly referenced and he has been quoted or interviewed. Additionally, he has written an article for the *Daily Mail's Weekend* magazine (the most widely read magazine in the country) about the history of Poirot, designed to coincide with the release of the new *Death on the Nile* film. This is a clear demonstration that the work he has been undertaking helps to inform popular discourse about her work, and his research has had a meaningful impact on such discussions [5.5].

Dr Aldridge appeared on television for a discussion of *Murder on the Orient Express* on the channel TRT World in 2017 [5.6], which was broadcast in 190 countries, in the 2017 Sky documentary *Agatha Christie: Murder Beyond the Orient Express* [5.7], and the 2019 French documentary *Le crime en héritage: Agatha Christie crève l'écran*. Most recently he was interviewed for the 2020 PBS/Channel 5 (US/UK) documentaries *Agatha Christie: 100 Years of Poirot and Miss Marple* and *Agatha Christie's England*, and has shared his research with Stephen Fry for a forthcoming appearance as expert and interviewer in a major ITV documentary (2021).

On the radio, Dr Aldridge is a regular contributor to BBC Radio Devon (which covers the area where Christie lived for most of her life), discussing new events and Christie's impact, including in relation to World Book Day celebrations [5.1]. Dr Aldridge has been a special guest for the American podcast *All About Agatha* three times, which has a global audience of over 100,000 'listens' every month. These episodes were discussing screen adaptations of Christie's work, coinciding with the release of *Murder on the Orient Express* and then their discussion of Christie's masterpiece *And Then There Were None* and Dr Aldridge's Poirot book [5.8]. Interest has only accelerated recently, with interviews for a range of popular international podcasts including *A Dark and Stormy Podcast* (US) and *Sheddunnit* (UK).

Dr Aldridge brings his research insights directly to audiences through public talks aimed at general audiences. At the *International Agatha Christie Festival*, in Torquay in September 2017, he presented a discussion of some lesser-known Christie film adaptations to a sold out audience [5.9]. He was invited to speak at Torquay Museum's *Christie Mystery Day* in September 2018 and he gave a special introduction to the first British cinema appearance of the film *Crooked House* in September 2019. Since then he has given five more invited talks to audiences and has proven to be an in-demand authority on Christie's works, with feedback indicating that he is a popular and entertaining presenter who helps to bring his research to life for the general public [5.12]. Dr Aldridge has worked with the organisers of the *International Festival* for several years, including assisting with events and chairing a meeting between the board at the request of

Christie's grandson. His online talk for the 2020 *International Agatha Christie Festival* has attracted over 2000 views to date (the highest number of the whole event), showing the extent of interest into his research.

In 2018, Dr Aldridge was invited to take part in the *Killer Women* literary festival, where he discussed Agatha Christie and Poirot on stage with internationally best-selling author Sophie Hannah, who also writes the official Poirot continuation novels, while in 2019 he gave a talk at the National Trust's inaugural *Greenway Literary Festival*, which took place at Christie's holiday home in Devon [5.10]. Following this Greenway appearance, Dr Aldridge was invited to become a member of Literature Works, an organisation supported by Arts Council England that helps established authors to support and mentor those honing their craft in the South West of England [5.13]. Despite the pandemic, Dr Aldridge took part in many invited literary/film and public events in 2020, including sell-out appearances at literary festivals such as *Noirwich* and *Perfect Crime*.

These extensive appearances in the media and on the literary scene demonstrate the value of this research to those seeking to enjoy and interpret Christie's work and understand her ongoing cultural significance.

Impact on the Christie archives and estate

Dr Aldridge enjoys a good relationship with her publisher HarperCollins and the family trust, who consult with him to clarify details when preparing press releases and similar publicity materials, for example he was asked consulted on the announcement of the BBC adaptation of *And Then There Were None* in 2015 [5.1]. His work has led to the return to the archives of a Poirot television production, *Murder by the Book* [5.11], the master tape of which had been destroyed by Disney, and the discovery of a unique filmed record of an original run of one of her stage plays in the 1950s [5.1].

Further impact

The impact that Dr Aldridge has made on wider understanding of Agatha Christie is showcased by the 2020 publication of *Agatha Christie's Poirot: The Greatest Detective in the World*. This book was commissioned following discussions between Dr Aldridge and Christie's publisher HarperCollins regarding his desire to bring his new research to a wide audience. This was especially apparent following Dr Aldridge's public talks which showed that there was a widespread appetite for new information and interpretation regarding Christie, which in turn leads to greater understanding of her work and her own impact. The result is a lavishly illustrated examination of her most famous detective, which shares insights and new discoveries in an accessible way, while always being based on rigorous research that has been shared with other Christie scholars, who have also reviewed the text before publication. Although it is early days for the book, it has been very well received and the book has already been picked up for distribution internationally, including translations into Greek and Estonian. International interest is no doubt the result of the fact that Christie herself continues to sell extremely well – for example, on the paperback bestsellers chart *Murder on the Orient Express* climbed to number two following the Branagh film. Dr Aldridge's work has placed him at the forefront of popular and academic international discussions about Agatha Christie and her enduring legacy.

5. Sources to Corroborate the Impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1 Testimonials from Mathew Prichard CBE (Agatha Christie's grandson) and David Fitzgerald (BBC broadcaster)
- 5.2 Amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Agatha-Christie-Screen-Crime-Files/dp/1349676950>
- 5.3 Cross Examining Crime blog:
<https://crossexaminingcrime.wordpress.com/2017/03/22/agatha-christie-on-screen-2016-by-mark-aldridge/>
- 5.4 *Agatha Christie on Screen* [review], 2018. Llewella Chapman, for *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01439685.2017.1381359>
- 5.5 Selected newspaper and magazine contributions:
- *Agatha Christie: Why we still love her "cosy crime" novels*, by David Barnett. *The Independent*, 14 September 2017.
https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/agatha-christie-cosy-crime-novels-murder-mystery-writer-why-we-love-a7942901.html
 - *Murder in mind: Why Agatha Christie was cruel, not cosy*, by Andrew Wilson.
<http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2017-05-25/murder-in-mind-why-agatha-christie-was-cruel-not-cosy/>
 - New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/05/briefing/north-korea-indonesia-venezuela.html>
 - *Ordeal by Innocence: the Agatha Christie mystery that almost got away*, by Andrew Billen. *The Times*, 31 March 2018 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ordeal-by-innocence-the-agatha-christie-mystery-that-almost-got-away-wjf7d62dr>
- 5.6 TRT World, 2017 [TV]. TRT World [interview], 15 November 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ptdFdXztE>
- 5.7 *Agatha Christie: Murder Beyond the Orient Express*, 2017 [TV]. Sky, 4 November 2017
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7593308/>
- 5.8 *All About Agatha*, 2017 [Podcast]. August 2017 <https://soundcloud.com/user-269339596/and-then-there-were-53-murder-on-the-orient-express-part-2-the-films>
- 5.9 *Agatha Christie on Screen: Mark Aldridge* [Talk at International Agatha Christie Festival]. 16 September 2017 <https://www.iacf-uk.org/activities/christie-screen-passing-mr-quinn-mark-aldridge/>
- 5.10 *Greenway Literary Festival*, 2019 [National Trust & Literature Works event
<https://literatureworks.org.uk/event/greenway-literary-festival-dr-mark-aldridge/>
- 5.11 Announcement by Kaleidoscope (archive recovery and preservation specialists):
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/kaleidoscopearchive/permalink/10161600887060198/>
- 5.12 Feedback from 2021 Solent University online talk and 2020 Festival talk on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGVW_WEU0rc&t=946s
- 5.13 Literature Works – Mark Aldridge <https://literatureworks.org.uk/writers/aldridge/>