

Mysteries of the ancient world and the modern mind explored in Agatha Christie, Archeology and Alzheimer's

Side by side, they put together the clues of the past to solve mysteries both ancient and modern.

For archaeologist Max Mallowan, the mysteries he tried to solve were often 4,000 years old. But the mysteries his wife, prolific mystery novelist Agatha Christie, were trying to solve seated at his side, typing away in the desert, they were mysteries concocted in her mind that could only be solved by those conjured up by her little grey cells.

Their collective work, along with some modern questions about whether Dame Agatha's little grey cells declined near the end of her career, will be explored at Hillary House next Wednesday as the Aurora Historical Society hosts Dr. Amy Barron with her talk 'Agatha Christie, Archeology and Alzheimer's'.

Dr. Barron, who is presently working at the Clarington Museum, holds a doctorate in Ancient Mesopotamian Studies and began taking a closer look at Mallowan's work while completing her thesis in the United Kingdom. But as much as she was invested in archeology, Mallowan's wife found a place in Dr. Barron's heart much earlier.

As a high school student, she devoured the works of Agatha Christie, a legacy of more than eighty works, which are as popular today as they were when her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published 100 years ago this fall.

'I just gobbled up these books and thought they were fabulous,' she says. 'But, I moved on, and when you're in university, you spend all your time reading very serious, heavy and dull academic things, but when I was on a research trip to London I was at the British Museum. The British Museum has most of the artefacts Max Mallowan dug up, except for the ones still in Iraq, and they also have Agatha's first editions. They put up a little pop-up exhibit during one year of my research that just showed in a really quick way the parallels of what Max was doing at the time and what Agatha was writing at the time. It really stuck in my head that there was a really neat connection between two things which I love. When I picked up [an artefact] and held it in my hand, I knew it had been held by an ancient Assyrian, Agatha Christie and then me without too many people in between and that is kind of cool.'

Dr. Barron's talk will take the audience through Agatha Christie's life, starting with her childhood in a loving family environment, through to the 'distressing' end to her first marriage and how that personal disaster led to an exploration to the unknown of the Middle East trying to get away from it all.

?That's where she fell into this whole new life she never could have imagined and was reborn at the age of 40 by marrying a fine, dashing young archeologist and discovering this whole world she previously knew nothing about. That filters down into her novels, so books like *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*, all of those encompass this new world that she is learning about.?

Dr. Barron will then touch upon the work of this dashing adventurer before touching upon their later years and what modern research suggests about Christie's state of mind as she entered the last two decades of her writing career in the 1960s and 70s.

?We don't know if Agatha Christie had Alzheimer's, but they have now done studies on authors?and the idea is that, over time, your vocabulary decreases and you just repeat words and phrases, and use words like 'everything' and 'something' rather than coming up with specific words more often. In Agatha Christie's works, from the first book to the end, you see almost a 20 per cent drop in her vocabulary, that her mental processes weren't as strong as they once were. This isn't just aging because they have done this with other writers as well, like Iris Murdoch (who lost a well-documented battle with dementia) and she shows the same trends, but there are other people like H.G. Wells who just got sharper and sharper right to the very end of his days.

?Many people have no idea that Agatha had this wonderful and exciting life. They picture a somewhat middle-aged mystery novelist sitting at her typewriter and I think they picture her like Miss Marple, living out in the English countryside. But she's working as an archeologist all day long, typing in the sands of the desert, and was living this incredibly exciting life. I often end up giving these talks at places where my crowd is on the slightly older side and I think it is neat to see a woman, who especially at the time in the 1930s, starts this whole new adventurous life for herself at a time where, at 40, most women, especially a woman who has been left by her husband, would have been just written off and settled into a life of spinsterhood. There she was instead making this whole new world for herself. I think that's a positive message for all of us!

?Now, when people live so much longer than they used to, they often say that 40 is the new 30 or whatever. You can always remake your life and start over.?

Dr. Amy Barron's 'Agatha Christie, Archeology and Alzheimer's' will take place at Hillary House next Wednesday, February 26, from 7 ? 9 p.m. at Hillary House National Historic Site. Tickets are \$10 (\$7 for Aurora Historical Society members). For more information, visit aurorahs.com or call 905-727-8991.

By Brock Weir