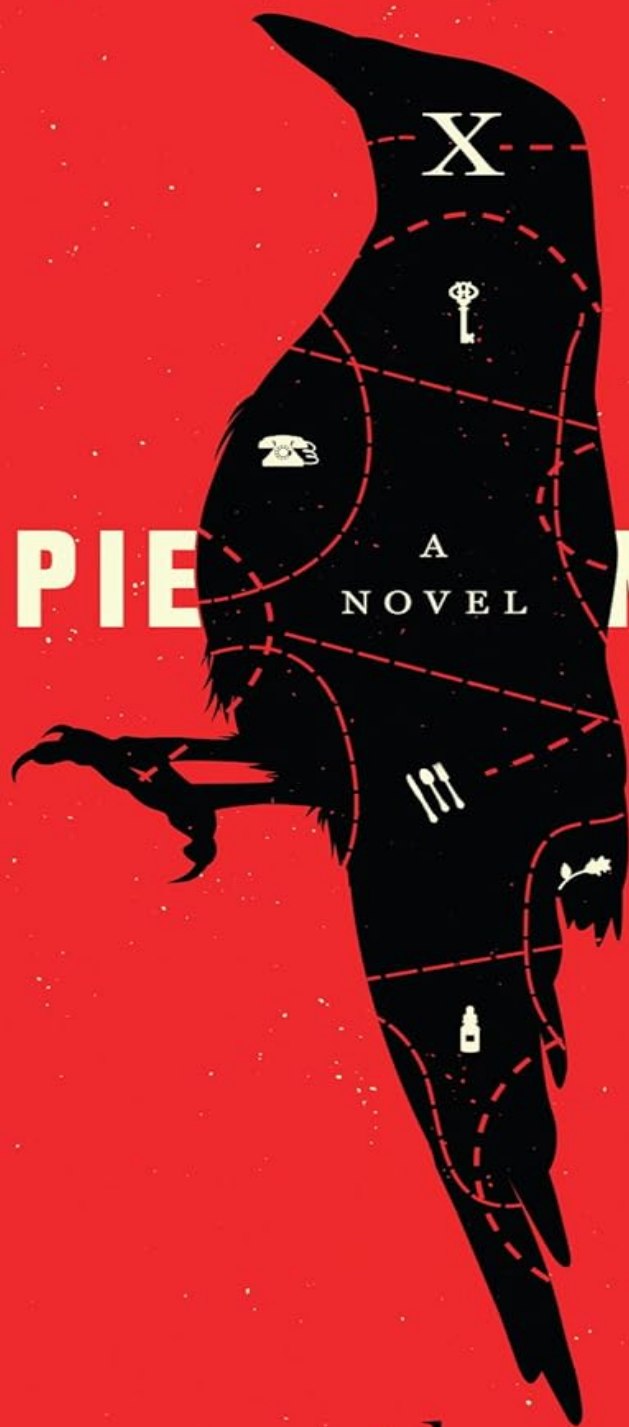


new york times bestselling author



MAGPIE MURDERS
A
NOVEL

anthony

horowitz

MAGPIE MURDERS

Anthony Horowitz



An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

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CROUCH END, LONDON

A bottle of wine. A family-sized packet of Nacho Cheese Flavoured Tortilla Chips and a jar of hot salsa dip. A packet of cigarettes on the side (I know, I know). The rain hammering against the windows. And a book.

What could have been lovelier?

Magpie Murders was number nine in the much-loved and world-bestselling Atticus Pünd series. When I first opened it on that wet August evening, it existed only as a typescript and it would be my job to edit it before it was published. First, I intended to enjoy it. I remember going straight into the kitchen when I came in, plucking a few things out of the fridge and putting everything on a tray. I undressed, leaving my clothes where they fell. The whole flat was a tip anyway. I showered, dried and pulled on a giant Maisie Mouse T-shirt that someone had given me at the Bologna Book Fair. It was too early to get into bed but I was going to read the book lying on top of it, the sheets still crumpled and unmade from the night before. I don't always live like this, but my boyfriend had been away for six weeks and while I was on my own I'd deliberately allowed standards to slip. There's something quite comforting about mess, especially when there's no one else there to complain.

Actually, I hate that word. Boyfriend. Especially when it's used to describe a fifty-two-year-old, twice-divorced man. The trouble is, the English language doesn't provide much in the way of an alternative. Andreas was not my partner. We didn't see each other regularly enough for that. My lover? My other half? Both made me wince for different reasons. He was from Crete. He taught Ancient Greek at Westminster School and he rented a flat in

Maida Vale, not so far from me. We'd talked about moving in together but we were afraid it would kill the relationship, so although I had a full wardrobe of his clothes, there were frequently times when I didn't have *him*. This was one of them. Andreas had flown home during the school holidays to be with his family: his parents, his widowed grandmother, his two teenaged sons and his ex-wife's brother all lived in the same house in one of those complicated sorts of arrangements that the Greeks seem to enjoy. He wouldn't be back until Tuesday, the day before school began, and I wouldn't see him until the following weekend.

So there I was on my own in my Crouch End flat, which was spread over the basement and ground floor of a Victorian house in Clifton Road, about a fifteen-minute walk from Highgate tube station. It was probably the only sensible thing I ever bought. I liked living there. It was quiet and comfortable and I shared the garden with a choreographer who lived on the first floor but who was hardly ever in. I had far too many books, of course. Every inch of shelf space was taken. There were books on top of books. The shelves themselves were bending under the weight. I had converted the second bedroom into a study although I tried not to work at home. Andreas used it more than I did – when he was around.

I opened the wine. I unscrewed the salsa. I lit a cigarette. I began to read the book as you are about to. But before you do that, I have to warn you.

This book changed my life.

You may have read that before. I'm embarrassed to say that I splashed it on the cover of the first novel I ever commissioned, a very ordinary Second World War thriller. I can't even remember who said it, but the only way that book was going to change someone's life was if it fell on them. Is it ever actually true? I still remember reading the Brontë sisters as a very young girl and falling in love with their world: the melodrama, the wild landscapes, the gothic romance of it all. You might say that *Jane Eyre* steered me towards my career in publishing, which is a touch ironic in view of what happened. There are plenty of books that have touched me very deeply: Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, McEwan's *Atonement*. I'm told a great many children

suddenly found themselves in boarding school as a result of the Harry Potter phenomenon and throughout history there have been books that have had a profound effect on our attitudes. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is one obvious example, *1984* another. But I'm not sure it actually matters *what* we read. Our lives continue along the straight lines that have been set out for us. Fiction merely allows us a glimpse of the alternative. Maybe that's one of the reasons we enjoy it.

But *Magpie Murders* really did change everything for me. I no longer live in Crouch End. I no longer have my job. I've managed to lose a great many friends. That evening, as I reached out and turned the first page of the typescript, I had no idea of the journey I was about to begin and, quite frankly, I wish I'd never allowed myself to get pulled on board. It was all down to that bastard Alan Conway. I hadn't liked him the day I'd met him although the strange thing is that I'd always loved his books. As far as I'm concerned, you can't beat a good whodunnit: the twists and turns, the clues and the red herrings and then, finally, the satisfaction of having everything explained to you in a way that makes you kick yourself because you hadn't seen it from the start.

That was what I was expecting when I began. But *Magpie Murders* wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all.

I hope I don't need to spell it out any more. Unlike me, you have been warned.

Magpie Murders

An Atticus Pünd Mystery

Alan Conway

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ALAN CONWAY was born in Ipswich and educated first at Woodbridge School and then at the University of Leeds, where he gained a first in English Literature. He later enrolled as a mature student at the University of East Anglia to study creative writing. He spent the next six years as a teacher before achieving his first success with *Atticus Pünd Investigates* in 1995. The book spent twenty-eight weeks in the *Sunday Times* bestseller list and won the Gold Dagger Award given by the Crime Writers' Association for the best crime novel of the year. Since then, the Atticus Pünd series has sold eighteen million books worldwide, and has been translated into thirty-five languages. In 2012, Alan Conway was awarded an MBE for services to literature. He has one child from a former marriage and lives in Framlingham in Suffolk.

THE ATTICUS PÜND SERIES

Atticus Pünd Investigates
No Rest for the Wicked
Atticus Pünd Takes the Case
Night Comes Calling
Atticus Pünd's Christmas
Gin & Cyanide
Red Roses for Atticus
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Robert Harris

‘Half Greek, half German, but always 100 per cent right. The name? It’s Pünd – Atticus Pünd.’

Daily Express

SOON TO BE A MAJOR BBC1 TELEVISION SERIES

One

Sorrow

23 July 1955

There was going to be a funeral.

The two gravediggers, old Jeff Weaver and his son, Adam, had been out at first light and everything was ready, a grave dug to the exact proportions, the earth neatly piled to one side. The church of St Botolph's in Saxby-on-Avon had never looked lovelier, the morning sun glinting off the stained glass windows. The church dated back to the twelfth century although of course it had been rebuilt many times. The new grave was to the east, close to the ruins of the old chancel where the grass was allowed to grow wild and daisies and dandelions sprouted around the broken arches.

The village itself was quiet, the streets empty. The milkman had already made his deliveries and disappeared, the bottles rattling on the back of his van. The newspaper boys had done their rounds. This was a Saturday, so nobody would be going to work and it was still too early for the homeowners to begin their weekend chores. At nine o'clock, the village shop would open. The smell of bread, fresh out of the oven, was already seeping out of the baker's shop next door. Their first customers would be arriving soon. Once breakfast was over, a chorus of lawnmowers would start up. It was July, the busiest time of the year for Saxby-on-Avon's keen army of gardeners and with the Harvest Fair just a month away roses were already being pruned, marrows carefully measured. At half past one there was to be a cricket match on the village green. There would be an ice-cream van, children playing, visitors having picnics in front of their cars. The tea shop would be open for business. A perfect English summer's afternoon.

But not yet. It was as if the village was holding its breath in respectful silence, waiting for the coffin that was about to begin its journey from Bath. Even now it was being loaded into the hearse, surrounded by its sombre attendants – five men and a woman, all of them avoiding each other's eye as

if they were unsure where to look. Four of the men were professional undertakers from the highly respected firm of Lanner & Crane. The company had existed since Victorian times when it had been principally involved in carpentry and construction. At that time, coffins and funerals had been a sideline, almost an afterthought. But, perversely, it was this part of the business that had survived. Lanner & Crane no longer built homes, but their name had become a byword for respectful death. Today's event was very much the economy package. The hearse was an older model. There were to be no black horses or extravagant wreaths. The coffin itself, though handsomely finished, had been manufactured from what was, without question, inferior wood. A simple plaque, silver-plated rather than silver, carried the name of the deceased and the two essential dates:

Mary Elizabeth Blakiston
5 April 1887 – 15 July 1955

Her life had not been as long as it seemed, crossing two centuries as it did, but then it had been cut short quite unexpectedly. There had not even been enough money in Mary's funeral plan to cover the final costs – not that it mattered as the insurers would cover the difference – and she would have been glad to see that everything was proceeding according to her wishes.

The hearse left exactly on time, setting out on the eight-mile journey as the minute hand reached half past nine. Continuing at an appropriately sedate pace, it would arrive at the church on the hour. If Lanner & Crane had had a slogan, it might well have been: 'Never late'. And although the two mourners travelling with the coffin might not have noticed it, the countryside had never looked lovelier, the fields on the other side of the low flint walls sloping down towards the River Avon, which would follow them all the way.

In the cemetery at St Botolph's, the two gravediggers examined their handiwork. There are many things to be said about a funeral – profound, reflective, philosophical – but Jeff Weaver got it right as, leaning on his

spade and rolling a cigarette in between his grubby fingers, he turned to his son. 'If you're going to die,' he said, 'you couldn't choose a better day.'

2

Sitting at the kitchen table in the vicarage, the Reverend Robin Osborne was making the final adjustments to his sermon. There were six pages spread out on the table in front of him, typed but already covered in annotations added in his spidery hand. Was it too long? There had been complaints recently from some of his congregation that his sermons had dragged on a bit and even the bishop had shown some impatience during his address on Pentecost Sunday. But this was different. Mrs Blakiston had lived her entire life in the village. Everybody knew her. Surely they could spare half an hour – or even forty minutes – of their time to say farewell.

The kitchen was a large, cheerful room with an Aga radiating a gentle warmth the whole year round. Pots and pans hung from hooks and there were jars filled with fresh herbs and dried mushrooms that the Osbornes had picked themselves. Upstairs, there were two bedrooms, both snug and homely with shag carpets, hand-embroidered pillowcases and brand-new skylights that had only been added after much consultation with the church. But the main joy of the vicarage was its position, on the edge of the village, looking out onto the woodland that everyone knew as Dingle Dell. There was a wild meadow, speckled with flowers in the spring and summer, then a stretch of woodland whose trees, mainly oaks and elms, concealed the grounds of Pye Hall on the other side – the lake, the lawns, then the house itself. Every morning, Robin Osborne awoke to a view that could not fail to delight him. He sometimes thought he was living in a fairy tale.

The vicarage hadn't always been like this. When they had inherited the house – and the diocese – from the elderly Reverend Montagu, it had been very much an old man's home, damp and unwelcoming. But Henrietta had worked her magic, throwing out all the furniture that she deemed too ugly or uncomfortable and scouring the second-hand shops of Wiltshire and Avon to

find perfect replacements. Her energy never ceased to amaze him. That she had chosen to be a vicar's wife in the first place was surprising enough but she had thrown herself into her duties with an enthusiasm that had made her popular from the day they had arrived. The two of them could not be happier than they were in Saxby-on-Avon. It was true that the church needed attention. The heating system was permanently on the blink. The roof had started leaking again. But their congregation was more than large enough to satisfy the bishop and many of the worshippers they now considered as friends. They wouldn't have dreamed of being anywhere else.

'She was part of the village. Although we are here today to mourn her departure, we should remember what she left behind. Mary made Saxby-on-Avon a better place for everyone else, whether it was arranging the flowers every Sunday in this very church, visiting the elderly both here and at Ashton House, collecting for the RSPB or greeting visitors to Pye Hall. Her home-made cakes were always the star of the village fête and I can tell you there were many occasions when she would surprise me in the vestry with one of her almond bites or perhaps a slice of Victoria sponge.'

Osborne tried to picture the woman who had spent most of her life working as the housekeeper at Pye Hall. Small, dark-haired and determined, she had always been in a rush, as if on a personal crusade. His memories of her seemed mainly to be in the mid-distance because, in truth, they had never spent that much time in the same room. They had been together at one or two social occasions perhaps, but not that many. The sort of people who lived in Saxby-on-Avon weren't outright snobs, but at the same time they were very well aware of class and although a vicar might be deemed a suitable addition to any social gathering, the same could not be said of someone who was, at the end of the day, a cleaner. Perhaps she had been aware of this. Even at church she had tended to take a pew at the very back. There was something quite deferential about the way she insisted on helping people, as if she somehow owed it to them.

Or was it simpler than that? When he thought about her and looked at what he had just written, a single word came to mind. Busybody. It wasn't

fair and it certainly wasn't something he would ever have spoken out loud, but he had to admit there was some truth to it. She was the sort of woman who had a finger in every pie (apple and blackberry included), who had made it her business to connect with everyone in the village. Somehow, she was always there when you needed her. The trouble was, she was also there when you didn't.

He remembered finding her here in this very room, just over a fortnight ago. He was annoyed with himself. He should have expected it. Henrietta was always complaining about the way he left the front door open, as if the vicarage were merely an appendage to the church, rather than their private home. He should have listened to her. Mary had shown herself in and she was standing there, holding up a little bottle of green liquid as if it were some medieval talisman used to ward off demons. *'Good morning, vicar! I heard you were having trouble with wasps. I've brought you some peppermint oil. That'll get rid of them. My mother always used to swear by it!'* It was true. There had been wasps in the vicarage – but how had she known? Osborne hadn't told anyone except Henrietta and she surely wouldn't have mentioned it. Of course, that was to be expected of a community like Saxby-on-Avon. Somehow, in some unfathomable way, everyone knew everything about everyone and it had often been said that if you sneezed in the bath someone would appear with a tissue.

Seeing her there, Osborne hadn't been sure whether to be grateful or annoyed. He had muttered a word of thanks but at the same time he had glanced down at the kitchen table. And there they were, just lying there in the middle of all his papers. How long had she been in the room? Had she seen them? She wasn't saying anything and of course he didn't dare ask her. He had ushered her out as quickly as he could and that had been the last time he had seen her. He and Henrietta had been away on holiday when she had died. They had only just returned in time to bury her.

He heard footsteps and looked up as Henrietta came into the room. She was fresh out of the bath, still wrapped in a towelling dressing gown. Now in her late forties, she was still a very attractive woman with chestnut hair

tumbling down and a figure that clothing catalogues would have described as 'full'. She came from a very different world, the youngest daughter of a wealthy farmer with a thousand acres in West Sussex, and yet when the two of them had met in London – at a lecture being given at the Wigmore Hall – they had discovered an immediate affinity. They had married without the approval of her parents and they were as close now as they had ever been. Their one regret was that their marriage had not been blessed with any children, but of course that was God's will and they had come to accept it. They were happy simply being with each other.

'I thought you'd finished with that,' she said. She had taken butter and honey out of the pantry. She cut herself a slice of bread.

'Just adding a few last-minute thoughts.'

'Well, I wouldn't talk too long if I were you, Robin. It is a Saturday, after all, and everyone's going to want to get on.'

'We're gathering in the Queen's Arms afterwards. At eleven o'clock.'

'That's nice.' Henrietta carried a plate with her breakfast over to the table and plumped herself down. 'Did Sir Magnus ever reply to your letter?'

'No. But I'm sure he'll be there.'

'Well, he's leaving it jolly late.' She leant over and looked at one of the pages. 'You can't say that.'

'What?'

“The life and soul of any party”.'

'Why not?'

'Because she wasn't. I always found her rather buttoned-up and secretive, if you want the truth. Not easy to talk to at all.'

'She was quite entertaining when she came here last Christmas.'

'She joined in the carols, if that's what you mean. But you never really knew what she was thinking. I can't say I liked her very much.'

'You shouldn't talk about her that way, Hen. Certainly not today.'

'I don't see why not. That's the thing about funerals. They're completely hypocritical. Everyone says how wonderful the deceased was, how kind, how generous when, deep down, they know it's not true. I didn't ever take to

Mary Blakiston and I'm not going to start singing her praises just because she managed to fall down a flight of stairs and break her neck.'

'You're being a little uncharitable.'

'I'm being honest, Robby. And I know you think exactly the same – even if you're trying to convince yourself otherwise. But don't worry! I promise I won't disgrace you in front of the mourners.' She pulled a face. 'There! Is that sad enough?'

'Hadn't you better get ready?'

'I've got it all laid out upstairs. Black dress, black hat, black pearls.' She sighed. 'When I die, I don't want to wear black. It's so cheerless. Promise me. I want to be buried in pink with a big bunch of begonias in my hands.'

'You're not going to die. Not any time soon. Now, go upstairs and get dressed.'

'All right. All right. You bully!'

She leant over him and he felt her breasts, soft and warm, pressing against his neck. She kissed him on the cheek, then hurried out, leaving her breakfast on the table. Robin Osborne smiled to himself as he returned to his address. Perhaps she was right. He could cut out a page or two. Once again, he looked down at what he had written.

'Mary Blakiston did not have an easy life. She knew personal tragedy soon after she came to Saxby-on-Avon and she could so easily have allowed it to overwhelm her. But she fought back. She was the sort of woman who embraced life, who would never let it get the better of her. And as we lay her to rest, beside the son whom she loved so much and whom she lost so tragically, perhaps we can take some solace from the thought that they are, at last, together.'

Robin Osborne read the paragraph twice. Once again, he saw her standing there, in this very room, right next to the table.

'I heard you were having trouble with wasps.'

Had she seen them? Had she known?

The sun must have gone behind a cloud because suddenly there was a shadow across his face. He reached out, tore up the entire page and dropped