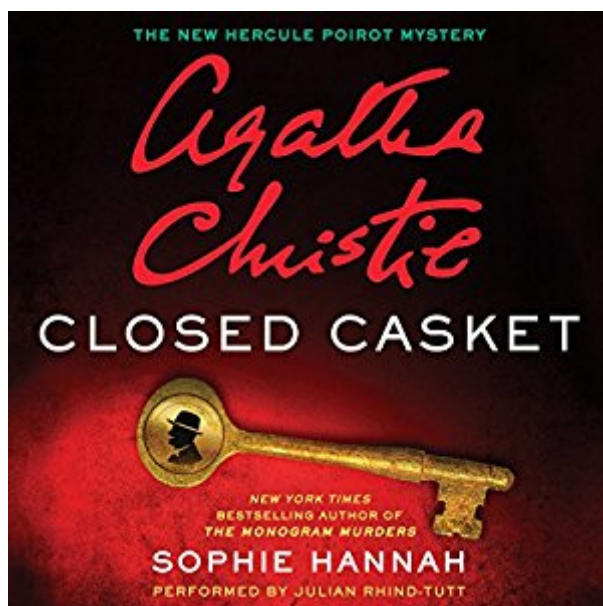


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Closed Casket: The New Hercule Poirot Mystery



Synopsis

Internationally best-selling author Sophie Hannah and the world's favorite detective, Hercule Poirot, return in this follow-up to *The Monogram Murders*, the national best seller hailed by *The Washington Post* as "literary magic".

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This novel is the second new Poirot story written by Sophie Hannah. I haven't read Hannah's other works, but I have read *The Monogram Murders*, the first novel she wrote with Poirot. I don't know if it's a feature of her work in general, but those two novels share many inelegant commonalities: the plot device of inauthentic, contrived conversations that are conveniently overheard and misunderstood; chapters that ramble on about some event in the past that somehow set up the current situation; and epicycles upon epicycles of complications that contribute nothing beyond padding out the book length and artificially obscuring the mystery's solution. The writing in the book is fine: unremarkable, but not terribly distracting. Christie's dialogue was workmanlike but had a parsimonious efficiency to it. Here, characters just ramble on uninterestingly. The writing outside dialogue isn't much better. Catchpool is apparently psychic. When he's in conversations, we're told that his interlocutors speak as if they're concealing a secret, or that they're boiling with rage, or have some other emotion or concern. Yet there's nothing in the conversation itself to indicate that fact, and the reader isn't given any physical description or actions to corroborate it. We're just flat-out told, rather than shown, what people think. That's poor writing in general, but it's damning in a

mystery novel. The reader should be drawing his own conclusions about the characters; instead, we're dependent on Catchpool not just for the facts of the case but also their interpretation. The mystery itself has some compelling points. Without revealing any spoilers, you can clearly tell what part of the solution was the hook the author set for the story, and it's indeed worth basing a novel on (which I would not have said about the scenario in its predecessor). It's a clever setup, although its execution is not worthy of it. I gave up trying to solve the mystery about halfway through. I lost confidence in the author's ability to tell a compact, self-contained story without a revelation three-quarters of the way through the book that some of the characters had a heretofore unrevealed secret backstory with the murder victim. That happened in the predecessor to this novel, and it happened in the current one as well. A murder mystery is supposed to be a puzzle for the reader to solve. With Catchpool's magical insights spoiling the current investigation and the unknowable backstory spoiling the murder itself, it's not a fair game. Instead of solving the mystery, I just patiently waited for the ending for the author to pull some arbitrary solution out of her hat. That solution had some gaping holes in it (for example, without introducing spoilers, the murder has no reason to be carrying around the murder weapon, and the novel lampshades this fact), but it more or less makes sense. It's not completely satisfying, but it's a definite improvement over the solution of the Monogram Murders. So, how is the book overall? As a reincarnation of Poirot, it feels clunky and fake. There's no real need for Poirot to even be in the novel; what little characterization occurs is mostly of Catchpool, the Hastings substitute. As a reincarnation of Agatha Christie, it's just not up to the task. It feels like an ersatz knockoff: someone who's copied a few of the mannerisms but missed the whole point of the writing. As a revival of a Golden-Age-style murder mystery, it's a respectable effort. It's not great, but I didn't feel cheated after reading it. It's bloated and needlessly complex, and the author ruins a genuinely good idea with tedious backstories and complications for the sake of complications. Christie at her best was a master of economy: the story fit together like a jigsaw puzzle, with no unnecessary pieces and no need to artificially shove pieces together. Hannah didn't meet that standard. With a better editor--- not just a copy-editor (though the dialogue could use some work), but someone to polish down the story to its deserving essentials--- she could have had a good story. As it stands, it's a decent but unspectacular one. I don't feel cheated or disappointed for it, but in retrospect I should have just read the first and last chapters. The book is decent enough that I'll read Hannah's next Poirot novel, but I wouldn't recommend this one. If Hannah improves in future stories, I'd recommend readers just skip to the later books in the series. If she doesn't improve, I'd recommend readers avoid her novels altogether. This novel is just mediocre.

At one point in the inevitable denouement, when Agatha Christie's sleuth (being channeled here, postmortem, by Sophie Hannah) Hercule Poirot has assembled all of the suspects in the murder in the drawing room to listen to the final product of the functioning of his famous "little grey cells", he refers to the murder itself being neat and tidy -- and almost simple. That made me stop and think about what frustrated me about this somewhat unsatisfactory homage to both Christie and Poirot: the original books are crisp, to the point and deceptively simple, as the police and Poirot go about their sleuthing. In contrast, this novel rambles far too much and, horror of horrors, instead of Poirot uncovering things or forcing suspects into corners, he has people sitting down to tell him and his sidekick/narrator, Scotland Yard detective Edward Catchpool, long stories about their pasts that prove critical to unraveling the crime. That kind of exposition isn't true to Christie's style, and it's not convincing to this type of mystery either. (It also succeeds in causing the pace to become still more dragging...) On the surface, there's enough here to appeal to a Christie fan. It's a classic country house crime. An elderly writer of mysteries aimed at the younger set ("Shrimp Seddon and the Lady in the Suit") decides to rewrite her will, and to mark the occasion, has convened a rather odd gathering. In addition to her son, daughter, daughter-in-law and the latter's fiancé, a noted and wealthy pathologist, she has invited Poirot and Catchpool to join the crowd, together with her two lawyers, and her new beneficiary. The latter is a surprise: it's her private secretary. Joseph Scotcher is an apparently charming young man, but also, apparently, incurably ill; Lady Athelinda Playford has even hired a private nurse to help him fulfill his duties. Now she has disinherited her own two children and left her estate to him -- if she outlives him. But she has a plan: she'll take him to the best doctors... The revelation of the new will, over dinner, is promptly followed by a murder -- but whodunnit, and why? There are red herrings aplenty. The problem is that the whole narrative, instead of moving at a cracking pace, kind of ambles along in an overly wordy fashion. Christie's novels don't delve into character, but focus on event, and Hannah makes the mistake of venturing a little too far -- but not far enough -- in the direction of a deeper dive in character. To cite just one example, Catchpool worries about his perceived failure vis a vis Poirot, and how that has affected his standing in the public eye, following the events recounted in "The Monogram Murders." That's the kind of thing that Christie would never have wasted several paragraphs of internal monolog and dialog on -- not when there was a plot to get moving. Bits and pieces read like Christie: Poirot sounded like Poirot, even if he didn't always behave like him (dashing off to London on the spur of the moment, for instance, rather than having a revelation based on an observation close at hand.) But the spirit of the original is lacking. If you're looking for an adequate homage to Christie, this will

do fine; on the other hand, why not just re-read one of the original Poirot novels that you haven't picked up in ages? It's almost certain to be even better.

Started this book snuggled up with a cup of tea by my side and smile on my face for a 'new' Poirot adventure to begin. What a MAJOR disappointment it was. Her narrator, Catchpool, seemed to be her 'Hastings' but was to also be a capable police detective with a promising career. Obviously this didn't work - love Hastings but lovable bumbling is more his mode than sharp detective skills - and this character did not work. Actually all of the characters seemed to be only 1 characteristic than any full blown personalities. And Poirot, one of the best known characters of mystery novels, there were only glimpses of him in the character she had portrayed. Plot was obvious as to who would die but didn't grip you at all. Had a hard time getting through this book and not worth while at all. No idea why anyone would give more than 2 stars. Oh Poirot so sorry to have you cast in such a book.

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