FABULOUS DAYS SERIES

#2

Fabulous Days with My Dog(s)

feat. Agatha Christie, Hercule Poirot, Bob, John Steinbeck, Charlie, Picasso, Lump, Andy Warhol, Archie, Virginia Woolf, Flush, Dean Koontz, Trixie, George Clooney, Einstein, Barack Obama, Bo, Abraham Lincoln, Fido, Richard Nixon, Checkers, Bill Clinton, Buddy, Laika, Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Anthony Weiss-Gagliardini

INTEGRAL

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The “Dumb Witness” of Agatha Christie Was a Fox Terrier

“I don't know why dogs always go for postmen, I'm sure,” continued our guide. “It's a matter of reasoning,” said Poirot. “The dog, he argues from reason. He is intelligent; he makes his deductions according to his point of view. There are people who may enter a house and there are people who may not—that a dog soon learns. Eh bien, who is the person who most persistently tries to gain admission, rattling on the door twice or three times a day—and who is never by any chance admitted? The postman. Clearly, then, an undesirable guest from the point of view of the master of the house. He is always sent about his business, but he persistently returns and tries again. Then a dog's duty is clear, to aid in driving this undesirable man away, and to bite him if possible. A most reasonable proceeding.”

Dumb Witness is a detective fiction novel by British writer Agatha Christie, first published in the UK by the Collins Crime Club on July 5, 1937, and in the US by Dodd, Mead and Company later in the same year under the title of *Poirot Loses a Client*.

The book features the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot and is narrated by his friend Arthur Hastings. One novel published after this one features Hastings as narrator, 1975's *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*.

Reviews of this novel at publication in 1937 were generally positive, though several pointed out what they considered to be plot weaknesses. The author does “this sort of thing so superlatively well”, while *The Times* in London questioned one of the actions by the murderer: “who would use hammer and nails and varnish in the middle of the night” near an open bedroom door? In the *New York Times*, this novel was not considered Mrs Christie's best, but “she has produced a much-better-than-average thriller nevertheless”,which is a view shared by “Torquemada” (Edward Powys Mathers), who called this “the least of all the Poirot books” and then concluded “Still, better a bad Christie than a good average”. By contrast, Mary Dell considered this novel to be Mrs Christie at her best. *The Scotsman* felt the author deserved “full marks” for this novel.

According to the plot, Emily Arundell, a wealthy spinster, writes to Hercule Poirot on the belief she has been the victim of attempted murder after a fall in her home in Berkshire. However, her family and household believe she actually fell by accident, after tripping over a ball left by her fox terrier Bob. When Poirot receives the letter, he learns she has already died; her doctor, Dr. Grainger, states her death was from chronic liver problems. A new will she made while recovering from her earlier fall bequeaths her vast fortune and home to her companion, Miss Minnie Lawson. Seeking to investigate Emily's belief someone wanted to murder her, Poirot, accompanied by his friend Arthur Hastings, notes that under her previous will, her nephew Charles Arundell would have inherited, along with her nieces Theresa Arundell and Bella Tanios. All three wish to contest the will, but do not pursue this course of action.

Visiting the house on the pretence of buying it, Poirot discovers a nail covered with varnish at the top of the stairs, deducing a string had been tied to it. Through Emily's last words, he concludes that Bob had been out all night and that she had therefore fallen down the stairs as a result of a tripwire, and that there is a chance Emily was indeed murdered. Her family thus become suspects in that matter. In his investigations, Poirot learns that during a seance held in Emily's home, a luminous aura was noticed coming from her mouth when she spoke. Visiting Lawson at her home, he learns that she saw someone moving about on the night of Emily's fall, who wore a brooch with the initials “TA”, while Lawson's gardener recalls Charles inquiring about his arsenic-based weed killer and is surprised to find the bottle containing it to be nearly empty. Bella later leaves her husband Jacob, on the implication he bullies her, taking the children with her. After Lawson helps to hide them in a hotel, Poirot moves her to

another on fear of a second murder; before he does he gives her a summary of Emily's death. The next day, Bella is found dead from an overdose of a sleeping medication.

Poirot soon brings together Lawson and Emily's surviving family, whereupon he reveals that Bella was the murderer. She had hated her husband, never truly loving him, and sought to separate from him and keep her children in England. As she had no means to do so, she decided to kill Emily in order to inherit her portion of her wealth. When her first attempt with the tripwire failed, she decided to switch one of her aunt's capsules for her liver troubles, with one filled with elemental phosphorus, knowing that her death from the poison would mimic the symptoms of liver failure. The aura witnessed by those attending the seance was because of the poison Emily had unknowingly taken. When she found out her aunt changed her will, and that Poirot had discovered the cause of her death, Bella found herself in far worse quandary. She thus relinquished her children back to their father, before committing suicide; the medication was originally intended to be used in murdering Jacob.

Poirot reveals that Lawson saw Bella on the night of Emily's fall, though in a mirror; the brooch's initials were reversed from that of “AT”—Arabella Tanios. The arsenic was stolen by Theresa, who intended to use it, but could not bear to do so in the end. A small sum of cash that went missing was later discovered to have been stolen by Charles; he was aware his aunt had changed her will, before her death. Knowing Emily wished for no scandal, Poirot honours this, while Lawson decides to share her inheritance with Theresa, Charles, and Bella's children. Meanwhile, Poirot and Hastings find themselves returning home with Bob joining them.

In 1996 TV series, starring David Suchet as detective Hercule Poirot, the role of the dog, Bob, the dumb witness who is suspected of causing Emily's fall, is slightly altered—in the novel the dog often left the ball on the landing, and the people of the house put it away, but on the night of Emily's fall the dog had been outside all night with the ball in a drawer. In the adaptation, the dog often takes the ball with him to his basket, never leaving it anywhere else, proving that when it was found on the stairs, it could not have been the dog's doing but must involve someone else; Bob was not outside the house when Emily fell in this adaptation.

The nove lis dedicated to the real wire-hairedfox terrier of the writer—Peter. Agatha Christie loved dogs, usually a terrier of some sort. Her first was called George Washington, but her favourite was a short-haired terrier called Peter who starred in *Dumb Witness* under the name of Bob. The book's dedication reads: “Dear Peter, Most Faithful of Friends and Dearest of Companions, A Dog in a Thousand”.

Previously, in a short story titled *Next to a Dog*, the famous author introduced another fox terrier. Widow Joyce Lambert is poor and out of work. So fond is she of her little half-blind ageing terrier Terry, a gift from her late husband that she will do just about anything to keep him. This story gave Christie the opportunity to indulge in her well-known love of dogs, particularly wire-haired terriers. She obviously had a huge affection for these creatures which comes out again in *Dumb Witness*, a novel which she dedicated to her own dog, Peter. The story was first published in book form in *The Golden Ball and Other Stories*, a US collection in 1971 and the UK collection *Problem at Pollensa Bay* in 1991.

John Steinbeck Travelled with French Poodle Charlie

John Steinbeck's work is peppered with quotes about dogs, which reveal his affection for furry friends. Here are a few gems about Charley from this literary giant:

“I've seen a look in dogs' eyes, a quickly vanishing look of amazed contempt, and I am convinced that dogs think humans are nuts.”

“Charley is a mind-reading dog. There have been many trips in his lifetime, and often he has to be left at home. He knows we are going long before the suitcase has come out, and he paces and worries and whines and goes into a state of mild hysteria.”

“It is my experience that in some areas Charley is more intelligent that I am, but in others he is abysmally ignorant. He can't read, can't drive a car, and has no grasp of mathematics. But in his own field of endeavor, which he is now practicing, the slow, imperial smelling over and anointing on an area, he has no peer. Of course his horizons are limited, but how wide are mine?”

“I've always tried out my material on my dogs first. Years ago, when my red setter chewed up the manuscript of 'Of Mice and Men,' I said at the time that the dog must have been an excellent literary critic.”

“I need a dog pretty badly. I dreamed of dogs last night. They sat in a circle and looked at me and I wanted all of them.”

When John Steinbeck hit the road to “rediscover America,” he brought his faithful companion Charley, a French poodle. *Travels With Charley* tells the story of his one-man, one-dog journey across the country.

John Steinbeck (1902-1968, Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962) is best known for his books that highlighted social and economic issues of his day. He wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, which won him the Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. In 1960, Steinbeck hit the road with his faithful dog Charley to crisscross America. The three month journey took the traveling duo through 34 states and over 10,000 miles. He recounted their adventures in a book called *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. Charley became Steinbeck’s ambassador and helped to make the trip a success, says Linda Cole.

Charles le Chien, better known as Charley, was a blue French Poodle born and raised in France in 1950. In Steinbeck’s words, “He was born in Bercy on the outskirts of Paris and trained in France, and while he knows a little Poodle-English, he responds quickly only to commands in French. Otherwise he has to translate, and that slows him down”.

Since Steinbeck spent his life writing about America, he decided to take a road trip in 1960 across the country to rediscover on a personal level the people and land. He was 58 years old and Charley was 10. According to his son, the real motivation was due to an illness the year before. Steinbeck knew he didn’t have a lot of time left and was feeling restless. Regardless of the reason, *Travels with* Charley chronicles his and Charley’s experience on the road.

Steinbeck’s original plan was to go on the trip alone. But his wife Elaine was fretting about his safety, and to make her feel better he decided to take Charley with him. She was pleased with his decision and said “That’s a good idea. If you get into trouble, Charley can go for help”. Steinbeck retorted “Elaine, Charley isn’t Lassie!”.

Charley was more than ready to go. The poor pup had been in a state of hysteria while Steinbeck was making preparations for the trip. He would hide in the truck trying to look small and was underfoot the entire time. If Steinbeck was going for a car ride, Charley wanted to go too.

The pair began their adventure in New York and drove along the Canadian/US border to Washington, down to California and then returned home along the southern part of the country. Steinbeck opened the book by describing his lifelong wanderlust and his preparations to rediscover the country he felt he had lost touch with after living in New York City and traveling in Europe for 20 years. He was 58 years old in 1960 and nearing the end of his career, but he felt that when he was writing about America and its people he "was writing of something [he] did not know about, and it seemed to [him] that in a so-called writer this is criminal". He bought a new GMC pickup truck, which he named Rocinante, and had it fitted with a custom camper-shell for his journey. At the last minute he decided to take along his wife's 10-year-old French Poodle Charley, with whom he has many mental conversations as a device for exploring his thoughts. He planned on leaving after Labor Day from his summer home in Sag Harbor on the eastern end of Long Island, but his trip was delayed about two weeks due to Hurricane Donna, which made a direct hit on Long Island. Finally, their travels start in Long Island, New York, and roughly follow the outer border of the United States, from Maine to the Pacific Northwest, down into his native Salinas Valley in California, across to Texas, up through the Deep South, and then back to New York. Such a trip encompasses nearly 10,000 miles.

In 1960, camper trucks were a bit of an oddity, but Steinbeck figured that would be his best option to avoid having to pay for lodging and food, and be able to travel incognito. So he had a camper truck built to meet his specifications and loaded it up with a stove, refrigerator and everything else he and Charley needed. He christened his new ride Rocinante, after Don Quixote's loyal horse.

Charley was an eager traveling companion. It didn't take long for him to become Steinbeck's official ambassador. The Poodle had a knack for making folks feel comfortable, and Steinbeck used it to engage in conversation with strangers he met along the way. His favorite method was to let Charley loose because he knew his dog would follow his nose to anyone cooking food. After waiting a bit to give Charley a chance to introduce himself to someone, Steinbeck would waltz up to apologize for Charley's doggy rudeness. It was his way of breaking the ice and striking up a conversation with people he didn't know.

Steinbeck was very much a lover of dogs, nature and other creatures. He had a talent for painting pictures with words—timeless words that make you feel, empathize, wonder and remember. He was able to aptly describe life in America—the good, bad and ugly. As a writer, his goal was to help readers see, feel and taste, and appreciate the wonders of the natural world.

Charley was Steinbeck's constant companion who always had a willing ear ready to listen when he ranted about how America had changed, not for the best in his view, while on their adventure across the country. Back home, Steinbeck penned his last book *Travels with Charley* from notes taken while on this trip. It isn't one of his best, but it is his most endearing book and considered a travelogue sprinkled with perhaps more fiction than facts.

What makes the book worth reading is Steinbeck's anecdotes about his dog, along with some true events of a changing America that troubled the writer. He expertly weaves in conversations with people he met along the way and descriptions of their lives.

John Steinbeck said: "A dog is a bond between strangers". Charley enjoyed meeting people and other animals while on the trip, but what he loved most was being with Steinbeck on the adventure of a lifetime.

Steinbeck's narrative has been challenged as partly fictionalized. Bill Steigerwald, a former staff writer for *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and an associate editor for *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, followed the route as it is laid out in the *Travels with Charley,* and wrote about it in a 2011 article titled "Sorry, Charley," published in *Reason* magazine. He later self-published his analysis in a 2012 book, titled *Dogging Steinbeck*. Steigerwald concluded that *Travels* contains such a level of invention, and Steinbeck took such great liberty with the truth, that the work has limited claim to being non-fiction.

He uses the dialogue with the itinerant Shakespearean actor near Alice, North Dakota, to exemplify his point. On October 12, Steinbeck wrote a letter to his wife describing a motel in the Badlands where he was staying, on the same date (October 12) as the supposed conversation in Alice. Given that the Badlands are some 350 miles away from Alice, Steigerwald concluded that the conversation with the actor was unlikely to have occurred. Steigerwald also challenges the idea that Steinbeck was "roughing it" during his journey, or that it was a solo voyage, save for Charley. Steigerwald wrote:

Steinbeck was almost never alone on his trip. Out of 75 days away from New York, he traveled with, stayed with, and slept with his beloved wife, Elaine, on 45 days. On 17 other days he stayed at motels and busy truck stops and trailer courts, or parked his camper on the property of friends. Steinbeck didn't rough it. With Elaine he stayed at some of the country's top hotels, motels, and resorts, not to mention two weeks at the Steinbeck family cottage in Pacific Grove, California, and a week at a Texas cattle ranch for millionaires. By himself, as he admits in *Charley*, he often stayed in luxurious motels.

Steigerwald was not the only person to claim Steinbeck did not write a purely nonfictional travelogue; Steinbeck's son believed that his father invented much of the dialogue in the book, saying: "He just sat in his camper and wrote all that [expletive]".

Steinbeck scholars have generally not disputed Steigerwald's findings, though they have disputed their importance.

For example, Susan Shillinglaw, a professor of English at San Jose State University and scholar at the National Steinbeck Center, told the *New York Times*: "Any writer has the right to shape materials, and undoubtedly Steinbeck left things out. That doesn't make the book a lie". In regard to the supposed conversations, she said: "Whether or not Steinbeck met that actor where he says he did, he could have met such a figure at some point in his life. And perhaps he enhanced some of the anecdotes with the waitress. Does it really matter that much?".

Jay Parini, author of a Steinbeck biography, who wrote the introduction for the Penguin edition of *Travels*, told the *New York Times*: "I have always assumed that to some degree it's a work of fiction. Steinbeck was a fiction writer, and here he's shaping events, massaging them. He probably wasn't using a tape recorder. But I still feel there's an authenticity there. Does this shake my faith in the book? Quite the opposite. I would say hooray for Steinbeck. If you want to get at the spirit of something, sometimes it's important to use the techniques of a fiction writer. Why has this book stayed in the American imagination, unlike, for example, Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which came out at the same time?".

Bill Barich, who wrote *Long Way Home: On the Trail of Steinbeck's America*, also a retracing of Steinbeck's footsteps, said: "I'm fairly certain that Steinbeck made up most of the book. The dialogue is so wooden. Steinbeck was extremely depressed, in really bad health, and was discouraged by everyone from making the trip. He was trying to recapture his youth, the spirit of the knight-errant. But at that point he was probably incapable of interviewing ordinary people. He'd become a celebrity and was more interested in talking to Dag Hammarskjold and Adlai Stevenson. The die was probably cast long before he hit the road, and a lot of what he wrote was colored by the fact that he was so ill.