



*In search of Ngaio*  
Discovering the Life and Work of Dame  
Ngaio Marsh

Dame Ngaio Marsh is probably New Zealand's most well-known writer. Internationally famous for her detective novels and nationally regarded for her contribution to the New Zealand theatre, she still remains a mystery. The *In search of Ngaio* exhibition explores the work and life of this unconventional and independent woman artist.

The purpose of this educational pack is to provide teachers with an introduction to the life and work of Dame Ngaio Marsh. The pack includes information, questions and activities related to Ngaio Marsh's work as a travel writer, novelist and theatre producer. It also provides links to more information as well as novels and short stories that are available at the Christchurch City Libraries. This education pack has been created to accompany the exhibition *In Search of Ngaio; Discovering the Life and work of Dame Ngaio Marsh*.

The exhibition will uncover Dame Ngaio Marsh's work and life as a crime writer, theatre director, a painter and a mentor. Amongst the material gathered from Ngaio Marsh House and Heritage Trust, St Margaret's College, Alexander Turnbull Library, Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision and Christchurch City Libraries, a keen detective eye will be able to find rare manuscripts and writing notes (she burnt most of them!), play production books, her own artwork as well as the artwork of The Group and even a beret – her signature style accessory.

# Visit

## In Search of Ngaio: Discovering the Life and work of Dame

### Ngaio Marsh

27<sup>th</sup> August – 27<sup>th</sup> November

Te Pito Huarewa | Southbase Gallery, Tuakiri | Level 2, Tūranga

Free

If you want to bring a whole class, please complete this [online form](#).

# Events

## Ngaio's Murder Mysteries

Come and enjoy one of Ngaio Marsh's short stories read aloud to you by a guest reader.

Sunday 4 September, 3pm

Sunday 16 October, 3pm

Sunday 27 November, 3pm

He Hononga | Connection, Ground Floor

## Visit Ngaio Marsh House

Your chance to learn more about Ngaio Marsh, discover where she lived and created her much-loved books.

Website: [www.ngaiomarsh.org](http://www.ngaiomarsh.org)

## Diaries of a Dame: The life of Ngaio Marsh through her own words

Hosted by New Zealand crime and travel writer Vicki Virtue, 'Diaries of a Dame' will look at the life of Dame Ngaio Marsh in her own words - through her diaries and travel writing. This will be a multimedia event using diaries, notes, photos, footage, audio and excerpts from Ngaio's life, looking at the world through her eyes. Presented by the Ngaio Marsh House and Heritage Trust.

Tautoru / TSB Space, Hapori | Level 1

Sunday 23 October, 2-3pm

Tickets: \$20

**Achievement objectives:**

**Making meaning – Listening, Reading, Viewing**

Show an understanding of how texts are shaped for different purposes and audiences.

*Considers how texts are constructed for a range of purposes, audiences, and situations, and identifying particular points of view within texts*

Show an understanding of a range of structures in Ngaio Marsh's texts.

*Identifies and understands the characteristics and conventions in Marsh's travel diaries and her detective stories and considers how they contribute to and affect text meaning.*

Show an understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts

*Makes connections by exploring ideas within and between texts from a range of contexts.*

**Create Meaning – Speaking, Writing and Presenting**

Show an understanding of how to shape texts for different audiences and purposes.

*Creates text that demonstrates an understanding of purpose and audience through deliberate choice of content, language, and text form. Students use their personal voice when appropriate.*

Select and use a range of language features appropriately, showing an understanding of their effects.

*Uses a wide range of oral, written, and visual language features to create meaning and effect and to sustain interest. Uses an increasing range of vocabulary to communicate precise meaning. Uses a wide range of text conventions, including grammatical and spelling conventions, appropriately, effectively, and with increasing accuracy.*

Organise texts, using a range of appropriate, effective structures.

*Achieves a sense of coherence and wholeness when constructing texts and organises and develops ideas and information for a particular purpose or effect, using the characteristics and conventions of a range of text forms.*

**Key competencies:**

**Managing self** - self-motivation, personal goals, appropriate behaviour,

**Relating to others** - listen actively, recognise different points of view, share ideas.

**Participating and contributing** - responding appropriately as a group member.

**Thinking** - using creative, critical, metacognitive and reflective processes, drawing on personal knowledge and intuitions.

**Using language, symbols, and texts** - recognising how choices of language affect people's understanding.

**Learning Outcomes. Students will be able to...**

*Complete activities and answer questions about Ngaio Marsh's life and work to develop an understanding about who she was, what she achieved, her writing and how it has been shaped.*

*Compare and contrast her travel writing to modern day examples to develop understanding about the times in which she wrote and examine how language and conventions in the text have changed.*

*Develop understanding and examine the characteristics and conventions in the text and plot structure of the classic detective novel.*

*Create their own characters, including a detective character and a cast of others who could be the cast of a whodunit.*

*Demonstrate an understanding of purpose and audience when constructing the text of a personal travel diary. Uses their personal voice.*

*Use a story arc to help plan a plot for a piece of creative writing.*

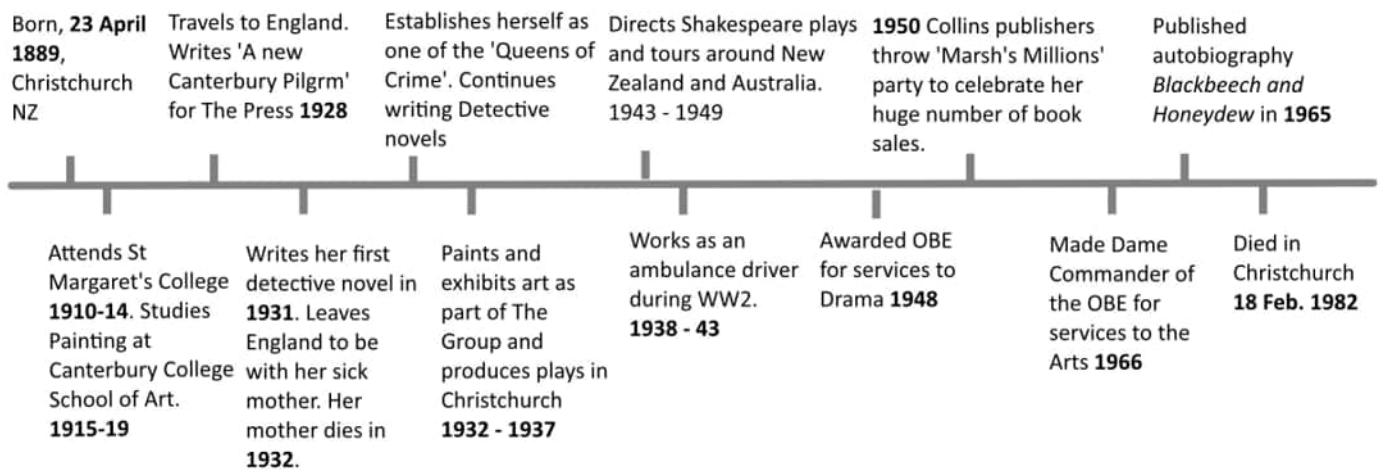
# Introducing Ngaio

*Ngaio Marsh was born in Ōtautahi in 1895 and is probably New Zealand's most well-known writer. She lived between London and Christchurch most of her adult life, either sitting in her armchair writing detective novels, rehearsing Shakespearean plays with students, visiting theatre, travelling or painting*

*She wrote 32 detective novels, sold two million copies worldwide, directed 48 plays and supported and educated numerous future actors. She was the first woman awarded an honorary Doctorate of Literature at the University of Canterbury and was made OBE (Order of the British Empire) and DBE (Dame of the British Empire) for services to drama and literature.*



*Publicly enigmatic, yet fiercely private, she lead a life of an independent woman, who dedicated her hard work, talent and time to the people and arts she loved the most.*



## Activity:

Split the class into small groups. Each group collects information on one aspect of her life and career, records it and presents to the class. The topics are; Early life, Travel writing, Novel writing and Theatre Production. Each group can explore the websites below and write down facts, key dates, titles of works and any other interesting information they find about Dame Ngaio Marsh on a large sheet of paper. Once they have collated their information, they can share what they have discovered with the class.

[Marsh, Edith Ngaio – Dictionary of New Zealand Biography – Te Ara](#)

[Ngaio \(ngaio-marsh.org.nz\)](http://ngaio-marsh.org.nz)

[10 Fascinating Facts about the "Queen of Crime" Dame Ngaio Marsh | RNZ](#)

[Trailblazers - Dame Ngaio Marsh | nzherald.co.nz - YouTube](#)

[Explore | Christchurch City Libraries](#)

[Dame Ngaio Marsh \(1895-1982\) | Christchurch City Libraries](#)

## Starting Questions

What obstacles and restrictions did women experience in the 1930's. As a woman in the mid 20th century, how was Ngaio Marsh a trailblazer?

What major achievement(s) should she be remembered for?

Why were her achievements significant?

Image: Ngaio Marsh with a book, 1962.

Christchurch City Libraries, Christchurch Star Archive, CCL-StarP-06115A.

## *Author Profile: Dame Ngaio Marsh*

Write as much information as you can about each topic in the boxes below.

Early Life

Theatre Life



Novels

Travels

## *Ngaio the Traveller*

*Marsh moved between New Zealand and England many times in her life. She loved travelling by ship, that's how she travelled all the time. She loved observing people and also did a lot of writing during her sea voyages. She wrote about her journeys for The Press in a re-occurring article called 'The Canterbury Pilgrim.' The articles described the places and ports that she visited on her journeys.*

*In her notebook she says, "The itch for travel is a chronic disease – incurable, insistent, sometimes flaring up, sometimes more or less quiescent. It can't be explained, it can be appeased in peace time only by indulgence, or in these bad days of war by some such counter-irritant as hard work."*

*Below is one of her articles from The Canterbury Pilgrim about a stop in Fiji. Read this and an article about Fiji from Stuff then answer the questions that follow.*

### **A NEW CATERBURY PILGRIM.**

#### **CALL AT SUVA**

**(SPECIALLY WRITTEN FOR THE PRESS)**

**14 JANUARY 1933**

The air was heavy and damply hot.

It had about it an ominous depression of unshed tears. The hills, sharply purple and emphatic at their base, lost outline behind a sulky company of clouds, to jag out, fantastically peaked, against a motionless and sombre sky.

Coming though the reef the ship seemed to shove her nose into a palpable warmth. A faint reek of coconut drifted up heavily from the wharf. The ship became still as if exhausted.

About the wharf stalked a company of sooty-skinned men, who moved elegantly like aristocrats and smelled very strongly of coconut oil. They worked under the direction of a bleached over-seer wearing linen slacks and sleeveless shirt. Above their heads fuzzy thickets of hair rose twelve stiff inches, and many of these had been dyed remarkably. One godlike creature had a forest of hair vividly magenta. This colour was repeated in the sari of a Hindu Women, in her bunches of flowers, and in the rows of dyed coral spread out widely on the wet wharf. Piles of Arsini-green bananas heaped against the dark walls of the sheds, white skirts and lava-lavas, the whites of the eyes in dark faces, completed the emphasis of clean sharp colour on a dark wet background.

Behind the wharf sheds little damp roads led away into town, into slushy mango swamps, and up, darkly into the hills. The round voices of the Fijians sounded loud and deep, as though they spoke through resonant tubes that pierced the moist air and made it vibrant.

With my hostess for the day I went ashore and walked about the twisting streets of Suva. At the central corners stood magnificent Indian Police, uniformed like Sikhs, grandly motioning on the rather cosmopolitan, weather stained string of cars, carts and lorries.

Fijians laughed, talked, deeply, firmly beat the pavement "blap, blap" with flat, bare feet, crossed and re-crossed the street, shouted at each other, or suddenly became still in attitudes of profound and gracious immobility. Skinny Indian children raced skittishly down the side streets or paced by their elders, making big eyes and tucking down the corners of their hair-stained mouths. Stray planters and over-seers were early abroad. We took a taxi at a turning near the native market, where a little by-street, crammed with half-a-dozen races of half-breeds ran away rakishly into the orange welter of a pineapple booth that was flank with heaps of fantastically coloured coral, baskets of hibiscus, and thick-scented frangipani.



The Indian Chauffeur took us through miles of mango swamps under the lee of purple hills towards my hostess's house in the Lami road, on the far side of the harbour. We passed on our way the Fiji gaol, and saw a handful of black gods made foolish by broad-striped convict suits and caps. The fans of dyed fuzz had been cut off their heads, and their lean, shining shanks protruded from their loose breeches. They were grinning very peaceably and seemed to have nothing to do just at that moment.

### **Dolce Far Niente**

The rough track meandered vaguely from my hostess's house over a low hill towards the "town" of a tiny settlement of native huts. On our walk there we were overtaken by a company of five Fijian girls. They padded along behind us at first and from time to time broke quietly into one of their brief and lovely songs. Sometimes, half through a falling cadence, they would leave off incontinently and begin a murmurous conversation or burst out into soft laughter. By the by they joined in with us, like friendly animals stared sideways at me, and smiled when my hostess told them in their own tongue how far I had come... "From England" – (England where now the trees are already half asleep in lovely austerity and from whence the swallows have adventured until next May.) It was so hot climbing the little hills into the little "town".

The leafy huts were clustered into the frangipani trees, the banana palms, and the tall, rank grass. They were charming; but the horror of galvanised iron threatens their green roofs, and it won't be so very long before they have become museum pieces. A pair of fat-stomached babies rolled their eyes at us and looked faintly scandalised about something. The Fijian girls laughed and sat down in the grass.

We stood on the central hillock where every night the head man of the village stands to give his orders for the coming day. My hostess told me how patient the white over-seer must be in his dealings with the natives and how his own orders must be broadcast through the mouth of this man. The overseer will explain earnestly that a tract of land must be drained and the work must begin tomorrow. The head man will agree with a jolly laugh and immediately give out orders for an entirely different schedule and everyone will laugh again in the friendliest manner possible, sing one of two little songs quite beautiful, and then go contentedly to bed. "They cannot be hurried," said my hostess. "Someday sooner or later, it will be done. That is how things work out in Fiji."

### **Last Lap**

The sea wrapped itself sluggishly about the thin rib of the reef and fell away on either side in an enervated pother of small breakers. Over Fiji the rain still hung in ponderable clouds. The deep purple of the islands was lit by desultory patches of livid sunshine, banana-green, sultry, but without iridescence. The ship passed though the fangs of the reef and, shaping her course south, even now anticipated the land-fall of the Great Barrier, the last barrier of all between England, where deep water comes down in white from the north, and New Zealand, where the manuka must already bloom for spring.



## Fiji's remote islands you've probably taken for granted

Pamela Wade Jun 05 2022

Written for Stuff.co.nz

Fiji is such a classic holiday destination for New Zealanders that it's easy to take it for granted, thinking you've been there, done the tropical resort thing, and crossed it off your list.

Big mistake. It's a country of more than 300 islands and 500 islets, spread over a million-plus square kilometres. There's a lot to discover.

About 50 kilometres north-west of Viti Levu, the Yasawa Islands are an archipelago of about 20 small islands set in warm, clear, tropical sea. Their dramatic volcanic peaks, fringed with lush green bush, rise up to almost 600 metres, while their sandy bays and spits are dazzles of white topped with a cartoon cliché handful of leaning coconut palms.

Long squiggles of foam promise reefs with more delights underwater. There is so much to explore here, so much to marvel at, and all of it in the jewel-bright colours of turquoise, aquamarine and emerald.

Captain Cook Cruises made it easy for me to get amongst all this, on a three-day Mamanuca and Southern Yasawa cruise in their MV Reef Endeavour. Now nearly 30 years old, the ship is classic and comfortable, fitting well into her role.

Although more than twice the length of her historic namesake, the Endeavour is by cruiser standards a small ship. Just 73 metres long, hosting a maximum of 130 passengers on four levels, she's the ideal size to explore these islands, able to get up close and personal, mooring just off their sandy beaches. Once ashore, courtesy of the tender, there might be an island, bay or reef all to ourselves to explore, on foot or having fun in the water snorkelling, diving, kayaking or cruising over fish-busy coral in a glass-bottomed boat.

At other islands, we received a warm welcome to villages where the locals live simply and are delighted to show visitors around. At the classically beautiful Sacred Island, it was very special to watch the traditional sevusevu ceremony, honouring the great waka Rogoboka, which brought the first Fijians here.

On Waya Island it was an education in more than one sense to be taken by the hand by little Lusi and given a proud tour of her school – a simple structure with louvred windows, rows of battered wooden desks, a blackboard covered in neat cursive writing and a printed notice on the wall instructing: 'Rocking of chairs is a bad habit'.

Outside in the playground, near the single netball hoop surrounded by a circle of beaten dirt, cheerful pupils waited to perform for us. Their songs included The Wheels on the Bus, on an island where there are no buses, or cars, or probably even anything much in the way of wheels – though there are solar panels, and a satellite dish.

Even so, life continues traditionally here: there are fish to catch, coconuts to gather, eggs to collect from the chickens scratching under the breadfruit trees. And when the chores are done, there is creativity to indulge, carving shells or threading them into necklaces, making fragrant leis, weaving tapa cloth in traditional patterns, and baskets and fans in all shapes and sizes, to lay out on the grass for visitors like us to admire and buy.

It was instructive for us to see that the practicalities of life, which occupy most of us most of the time, are here less important than the social and spiritual sides. Stopping for a chat, sitting peacefully under a palm tree or wandering into the bath-warm water for a leisurely dip with a friend is just as valid a use of the day as doing chores.

As we saw on our Sunday evening arrival at Monu Island, religion especially is a huge part of villagers' lives. It was a stirring experience to attend a choral service in the plain little church, where the congregation was dressed in their colourful best, and belting out the hymns with spine-tingling gusto. Their unaccompanied harmonies drifted out of the open windows past chickens roosting in frangipani trees, while ceiling fans circled lazily, stirring the scent of the flowers into the clean smell of soap rising from the congregation.

After the service, it was all about being sociable again, the villagers mixing with us out on the green before we wandered back past their little thatched bures to the beach, to wave goodbye as we returned to the ship. Moored out in the bay, sleek and white, her lights shining brightly against the now dark sky, Reef Endeavour looked like something from another world.

Inside, though, despite all the modern comforts and conveniences, there was still a strong connection with the islands. Almost every one of the crew was Fijian, friendly, hospitable and keen to share their country, culture and cuisine with us. The crew choir put on a hugely enjoyable show of singing and dancing, and we were happy to join in on Pacific Island Night.

The food on board was so tasty, and so generously served by friendly staff anxious that no-one should go hungry, that it was just as well there were so many opportunities to be active in the water, with two different location stops each day. One of these was at Monuriki, the uninhabited rocky islet where an authentically-emaciated Tom Hanks had long conversations with his volleyball friend Wilson in the movie *Cast Away*. He lost over 22kg for the role – not taking some of them home with me was the only challenge on this cruise.

Though time seems to pass slowly in the Yasawas, our three days were over much too soon. There was so much more to explore: I wanted to visit Nanuyu Lailai, its perfect long beach and brilliantly clear water so spectacular that it, too, has its Hollywood connection, as the location for *The Blue Lagoon* movie. Then I could go further north to see Sawa-i-Lau's luminous, flooded limestone caves, hidden inside a tiny, peaked island. It would have been thrilling to hear the drums beat on Drawaqa Island, summoning the manta rays for us to swim with. I wanted to see turtles, lots more colourful coral reefs, to swim under a tall waterfall, hike to the top of one of those pointy volcanic peaks, eat coconut crab on the beach. It's all there, waiting, along with the warmest of welcomes. You just have to go.

## Questions

**Ngaio Marsh's text was written in 1933 for The Press and the second text is written for Stuff.co.nz in 2022. Read both articles and answer the following questions.**

Discuss the way travel has changed since 1933.

Both these stories are about travelling in Fiji. Whose point of view is the text from? How does each writer feel about the place?

How many of the readers would have also be travellers in 1933? What is Ngaio Marsh trying to convey to the readers? What was the purpose of The Canterbury Pilgrim article?

What is the purpose of the 2022 story about Fiji from Stuff.co.nz?

Ngaio Marsh was a successful painter before she became a writer. She describes what she sees and experiences vividly as if she is painting the scene with her words. Give an example from the text where you think she has successfully described something. Why did you choose this example? What effect does it have?

Identify in The Canterbury Pilgrim text the following language features:

Personification

Simile

Metaphor

How are the Fijian people represented in each text?

In Ngaio Marsh's story she describes people in Fiji as "sooty-skinned" and "half-breed". It would not be acceptable to describe people in this way today. What has changed and why do you think it was accepted back in 1933?

Are there any other parts of Marsh's article about Fiji that seem problematic to you?

## Activity:

Write your own travel diary. Write a description of a place you like to visit or travel to. How do you get there? What do you like about this place? What or who is there? What sights, sounds and smells do you experience in this place? What do you do there?

*For more examples of The Canterbury Pilgrim visit :*

[https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers?snippet=true&title=CHP&query=new+canterbury+pilgrim+marsh&start\\_date=01-09-1928&end\\_date=31-12-1938](https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers?snippet=true&title=CHP&query=new+canterbury+pilgrim+marsh&start_date=01-09-1928&end_date=31-12-1938)

## *Ngaio the Detective Novelist.*

*A whodunit is a detective story or a murder mystery. This genre usually starts with a mysterious unsolved crime and a cast of possible culprits. A logical and intelligent detective character investigates and gathers clues to solve the crime. The reader follows the clues and tries to put the puzzle together to figure out who is responsible.*

*Detective stories have been popular for over 150 years (the most famous would be Sherlock Homes written by Aurthur Conan Doyle in 1887) but they were particularly popular in Britain in the late 1920's and 1930's. It was at this time, In 1931, that Ngaio Marsh wrote her first detective novel on the floor of her London flat on a wet weekend. Without much hope of being published she sent it to the same publishers as Agatha Christie and then left England and returned to New Zealand. She was extremely surprised to receive a letter at her home in Christchurch saying her book was going to be printed.*



*This era is regarded as the Golden Age of the detective novel. There are two possible reasons for its extreme popularity at this time. It was a time in history rife with corruption, hardship and crime. The world was recovering from World War 1 and was also in the grip of the Great Depression. Detective stories were easy to read and were entertaining. They followed logical steps and ended in a neat satisfying outcome where the crime was solved, the villain was punished and the other characters' lives could return to normal. This appealed to the masses in those difficult times. Murder games at dinner parties were also popular around this time, especially in the upper classes who had large country homes to host these events. A murder game party is where you invite guests who are given a character to play for the night and they arrive in costume. One person is assigned the role of the victim and the others have to follow clues to figure out who is the murderer.*

*In the years that followed she wrote over 30 more novels. Her detective character, Inspector Roderick Alleyn featured in them all. She was known as one of the '4 Queens of Crime' along with Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham. She was hugely successful worldwide and sold over 2 million copies of her books. Many of her stories were written in her home in Christchurch and four of her novels were set in New Zealand.*

*Today, the classic whodunit remains an audience pleasing genre in books, television and movies. Activities like the board game Cluedo and also escape rooms rely on whodunit conventions to be played. TV series like Midsomer Murders (BBC), Only Murders in the Building (Disney+) or The Brokenwood Mysteries (TVNZ) are still popular with audiences today.*

## The Whodunit formula

### Characters

A rational and intelligent detective – Sometimes not in the police force or a detective by job.

An assistant for the detective, usually slightly less intelligent than the detective.

A cast of characters from or a group of people, all of who can be possible suspects.

A villain— The person who commits the crime. Is revealed at the end. Usually confesses to the crime.

### Conventions

A mystery – sometimes involving murder but sometimes another serious crime.

Clues to the solution which the reader can try to solve and enjoy as a puzzle.

Red Herrings – Clues that lead to nothing. They are deliberately added to the story to make the plot more complicated, provide a distraction or make the reader suspect the wrong culprit. Sometimes a red herring clue leads us to suspect a character who is a likely villain.

Build-up of tension.

A satisfactory resolution in which the mystery is solved.

## Questions

What was life in the 1930s like? Choose one of the following topics to research.

A woman's role in the 1930s

Crime in the 1930s

The Great Depression

The world Post World War 1.

What stresses and challenges were faced by the general population? How does that compare to challenges and stresses now?

## Activities

1. Create a cast of characters and start plotting your own whodunit.

Think of a group of people

*E.g. A sports team*

Make a list of at least 5 people who are in this group. Make them all different from each other.

*e.g. A coach, the star player, a team supporter*

Briefly describe each one of these characters. What do they look like? What sort of person are they?

Who will the victim be?

Who is the most likely culprit that everyone suspects but is not the murderer?

Who is the real villain?

What is the killer's motivation? Why did they do this?

Imagine a detective character. Who are they? What do they look like?

Write a brief description of them. What makes them a good detective?

2. Watch a modern whodunit TV show such as Midsommer Murders or The Brokenwood Mysteries. How do the characters and plot follow the conventions of the classic detective story? Were there any red herrings? How was the mystery resolved? Complete the worksheet provided.

(Or you can watch Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn Mysteries (BBC) available here:

[Search | Christchurch City Libraries | BiblioCommons](#) )

**Title**

**Characters** - Write their names and give a brief description.

**Detective**

**Assistant**

**Suspects**

**Villian**

What is the problem the detective is trying to solve?

List the clues the detective found

**Setting**

Red Herrings - Were there any clues that distracted you that lead nowhere?

How does the detective solve the case?



## *In Her Own Words*

**Listen to Dame Ngaio Marsh talk about her writing, the detection club and being a theatre producer and answer the questions below.**

[32260 | Collections - Catalogue - Catalogue Item | Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision \(ngataonga.org.nz\)](#)

What is her approach to start writing a new detective novel? Explain the steps she goes through to get her story mapped out.

What other steps does she take to help her write the story and make it believable?

Who does she say reads her detective novels?

Do you think she enjoys being a detective novelist? Explain why?

What does she like to read?

What is the detection club; what happened while Ngaio Marsh visited there for the first time?

How did she become a writer? What was her first book called? What do you think her opinion of her first book is?

The interviewer says Ngaio Marsh is better known in New Zealand for her work in the theatre. Ngaio Marsh recounts how she began producing Shakespearean plays for the University. Explain in your own words how this began.

What did she learn about producing Shakespearean plays at the time?

What is her opinion about the future of theatre production in New Zealand?

When she was young how did she join the theatre world? What early experiences did she have?

What does she mean by the "The Slump"?

The recording finishes with the interviewer saying, "We've called this programme 'A Portrait of Ngaio Marsh but it's really 'A Portrait of Ngaio Marsh at Work' because you see Ngaio Marsh doesn't talk about herself, she talks about what she does, not what she is, and that in itself gives you a portrait of Ngaio Marsh."

What do you think that means?

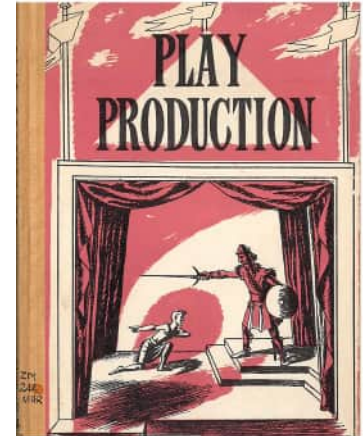


# *Ngaio the Theatre Producer*

*The theatre was Marsh's first and great passion. In her younger years she worked as an actress and travelled with the Allen Willkie Shakespeare Company around New Zealand and Australia and continued to work with other theatre groups until she moved to England and wrote her first novel.*

*In 1943 she started producing Shakespearean plays with the University of Canterbury drama society. At this time she was already a successful novelist. She was able to use the money made from book sales to continue to produce plays and help support other actors and writers.*

*In 1960 Ngaio Marsh wrote a guide for students about producing a play for the Department of Education. The book, called *Play Production*, walked students through the steps they needed to take to successfully put on a play, but it also talked about what makes a successful plot and what makes a character more complex and interesting to the audience. The following extract is from that book. In Ngaio's own words she explains what a play is and what makes a play's plot successful.*



## **What is a Play?**

A good play sets out in satisfying words, ideas and feelings that are, or will be come, important to all of you. It does this in the most exciting manner: through action. In a play things happen all the time, ideas come alive, a story puts on flesh and blood and works itself out before your very eyes, the audience hears and sees the play as if it were real. The actors live it out and it **is** real. In producing a play and acting in it, you go on an adventure. You are like explorers who set out on a voyage of discovery and the better you are guided, trained and equipped for your journey, the better you'll enjoy yourselves. You'll find out a lot about yourselves when you act in a well-produced play.

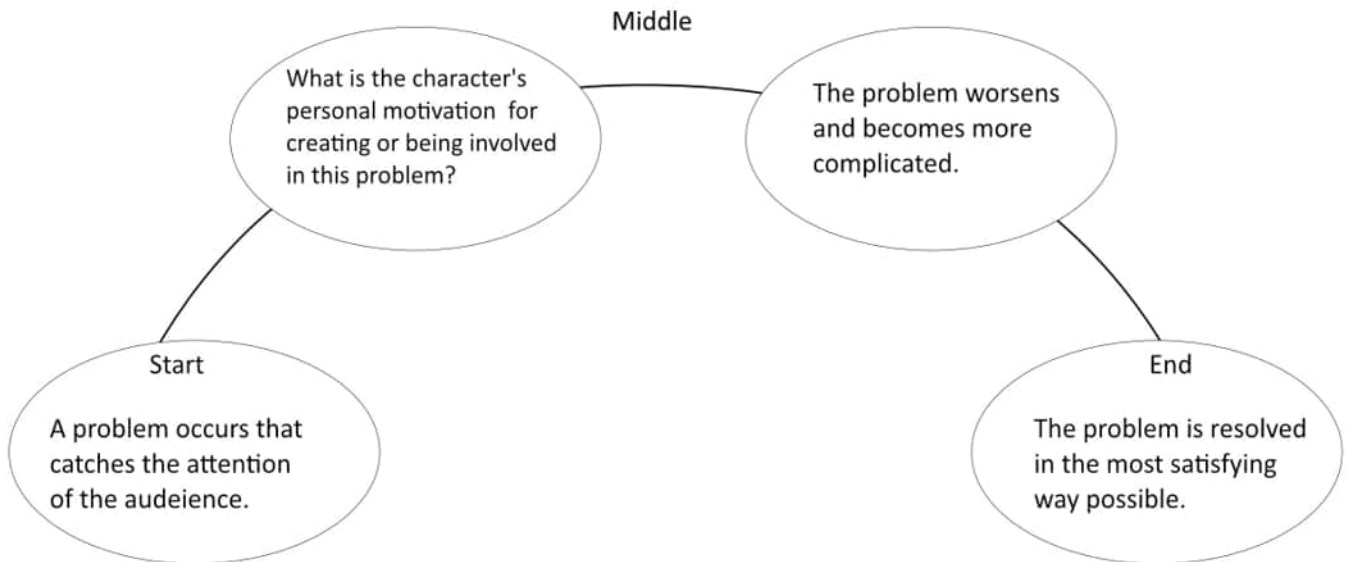
A play has shape or form. It has a beginning in which it catches the attention of the audience and makes them eager to know what's going to happen, a middle in which a great deal does happen and an end that completes the whole work in the most satisfying way possible and sends everybody home feeling richer for what they have seen and heard.

A play can simply be about physical events. One man shoots another man and gets away with enough uranium to blow up the whole country. The hero goes after him, nearly gets blown up himself, has a number of breath-taking escapes, and at last rescues the uranium and is rewarded by a grateful sovereign and people.

This is simplest kind of play, the interest is in what happens physically to the characters, not what happens inside their mind or in why they behave as they do. But suppose the man who steals the uranium does so because of some extraordinary twist that possesses his mind, and suppose the twist has come to him through a terrible event in his childhood and that he can't get rid of it by any other means: then you have the beginning of a different kind of play – a play of ideas. But if this man may be seen to represent not only himself but the destructive side of human nature, something that has to be reckoned with throughout history: What then you get a much more important play of much more exciting ideas. If it succeeds, you may get a great play.

## Activity

1. In the text 'What is a Play', Marsh explains how a simple plot can be complicated to make it more interesting and satisfying to the audience. Use this simple story arc to help plan a piece of creative writing of your own.



2. Create a story board or a piece of creative writing of your plot.

## More Reading

To find more books by and related to Ngaio Marsh search here:

<https://my.christchurchcitylibraries.com/blogs/post/ngaio-marsh-crime-writer-now-in-ebooks/>

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