

Don't be such a  
copycat!: from "and  
then there were  
none" to "ten"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

They say imitation is the highest form of flattery. However, that can only go so far before it is criticized as lacking originality; some might even claim it only creates a worse version of something that may have been praised as being the best. Nonetheless, it all depends on whether or not something is an identical copy of an original work or if it is just based off the main idea of the original plot. Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* is recognized around the world as a great novel due to its sophisticated plot. Given this praise, many others have taken on the task of emulating Christie's work with similar mystery novels. Gretchen McNeil's *Ten* is an example of such a novel. She uses the plot and the character development to write a novel that appeals to contemporary teenagers. McNeil's story by no means surpasses Christie. Nevertheless, her twist on the story allowed for a captivating novel. Through imitation of the plot, character development and puzzle elements, McNeil successfully wrote an inspired novel based on Christie that is just as suspenseful and captivating.

The biggest similarities between these two novels begin with the most important attribute: the plot. McNeil's novel is plotted identically to that of Christie's, in which ten characters are united through a random event in which they later discover they will each be killed as a means of vengeance. They all meet on a remote island, which is only accessible by a boat that mysteriously never returns once they all reach their destination.

Nevertheless, there are some slight alterations in McNeil's novel that adhere to the changes in time period. Foremost, Christie's novel was written in 1939, which can be observed based on how the story is set up. All the characters are older and rely on their own instincts and impulses as a means

of attempting to survive. However, in McNeil's story, these minor details are somewhat tweaked. Her characters are all teenagers, which implies that these characters are not as mature and depend on some sort of guidance. Additionally, there is a small component that might not be easy to catch, that being the mentioning of the use of technology. McNeil writes, "'The phones,' Kumiko said slowly like she was speaking to a child, 'are out'... The concept sunk in. What were they going to do? No phones, no cells, no internet." (80-81) Considering this novel was written in 2012, there is a major difference between the eras that Christie's novel was written versus McNeil. The technology that is available today did not exist during the time that Christie wrote this novel, which in itself adds an interesting element to the story because the characters must find other means to attempt to communicate with someone to get them off the island. By contrast, 2012 falls within the era in which technology has boomed, thus it was an insightful detail for McNeil to incorporate. Had she not included this minor detail, it may have been more difficult for readers to understand how the teenagers would figure out how to get off the island since technology is accessible and it would not make sense if they did not take advantage of it.

Another similarly structured concept based off of Christie's work is the character development throughout the novel. A lot (if not all) of the characters in McNeil's work were similar to those of Christie's. For example, readers meet Minnie in the very beginning. She appears to be normal at first, but readers quickly learn that there is something off about her. McNeil writes, "Meg recognized the sharpness in Minnie's voice. It usually signaled a rapid change in Minnie's mood, which happened all too frequently these

days, especially when she stopped taking her antidepressants." (2) It is easy to note that Minnie was an unstable character without her medications, thus showing she has some kind of mental disorder (later proven to be bipolar disorder). This kind of mental instability is shown in Vera. To further support this, Christie writes, " She cried out in a high shrill voice, shaken with wild bursts of laughter... They stared at her uncomprehendingly. It was as though the sane well-balanced girl had gone mad before their eyes." (186) Although Vera's character appeared normal, readers were aware that any sign of vulnerability could bring out her madness. In a similar sense, both these characters portray instability. Vera's unpredictability derives from her obsession for Hugo, and how she was willing to do anything for him. With regards to Minnie, her instability is due to her bipolar disorder, which is a serious medical illness. However, the authors choose different endings for these characters: Christie had Vera surprisingly killing the only person left alive with her, but her own insanity led her to suicide. In the case of McNeil, this ending needed to be changed because readers were already aware of Minnie's weakness, thus having her be the killer would take away from the suspense since that would be the reader's first guess. Nevertheless, McNeil's incorporation of this concept with the ultimate killer in her novel was subtler, and thus just as successful.

While Christie successfully demonstrated how insanity can lead you to suicide in the case of Vera, McNeil keeps the element of surprise but with a different killer. She still emulated the idea of insanity but in a different form. She continues writing, " Claire sent her diary with a note. Make them understand what they did, Tom. All of them. So that's what I'm doing. Making

you understand." (278) Even though it is understandable that Tom would want to seek vengeance for his sister's suicide, the way in which he handled it was twisted. Every time his sister was bullied or mocked in school, he made sure that those people paid for their actions, thus further demonstrating that his sense of protectiveness extended to the point of insanity. In this sense, Tom emulates Wargrave, who was Christie's prime murderer. Wargrave blatantly accepts his madness when he says, " I have wanted-let me admit it frankly-to commit a murder myself...I must-I must-I must-commit a murder!" (Christie 287). Both characters act upon a vengeance that is led with partial reasoning and majority lunacy, but the ways in which these authors go about creating their characters and their development differs. McNeil is just as successful as Christie in surprising readers about who the true culprit is with the incorporation of a lunatic brother who seeks to avenge his sister's suicide. However, the variability between these character developments adds for a more complex plot twist.

Christie was very clever in regards to the way in which she incorporated different elements to supplement the puzzle. She went about doing this by using a nursery rhyme, where it starts of with ten soldiers and ultimately none are left standing in the end. This was the most powerful element Christie incorporated because it kept readers on edge about who would be killed next and how the murder would follow the death described in the nursery. On the other hand, McNeil did not incorporate a detailed story that the murders would follow. It was not until later on in the story that readers may or may not have caught on to Claire's diary, which depicted how the murders would go about. Nonetheless, it was subtler, and had she not

written out the main character's train of thought it would have completely slipped a reader if they were not actively seeking out a clue. She writes, " He said if I really loved him, I'd help him because if I didn't, it would be like I was shooting him through the heart... The writing. The deaths. A suicide note on the back of sheet music. Images of a gavel like they use in the debate team. Math problems scrolling across the screen. Vengeance is mine." (202) In this scene, Meg, the main character, is trying to explain to herself how Nathan was shot in the heart, because it sounded familiar to her. It was only after she recalled that she had read it in Claire's diary that she realized that Tom was following his sister's words in an implicit way. This in itself was a lot stronger than Christie's approach because it required readers to pay extremely close attention to the minor details, details that would have completely slipped the mind if the main character had not thought about it. This further shows how McNeil was meticulous about when to give out clues to readers in such a way that Christie lacked.

As is the norm between these authors, whatever one lacked the other one was good at. Christie did a good job in incorporating little china figures as a means of counting down the deaths. She continues writing, " In the middle of the table the little china figures. Ten of them there were...When I was clearing up, there wasn't but nine... But now, when I came to clear away... There's only eight!" (105-106). It was Roger who noticed that the china figures began to disappear as the murders took place. Although one could argue that there was no point to the china figures, it helped readers keep track of how many characters were left standing. McNeil did her best to imitate this concept in order to allow her readers to follow, but the method in

which she decided to go about doing this was not as effective. She used a slash mark in red paint in order to keep tally of who remained alive. This technique was not as effective because it did not really follow the plot of her story. Christie's made more sense because it complimented the nursery rhyme that she incorporated, whereas McNeil seemed to have added it in a means of turning the mystery novel more into a horror story. As a result, this was a poor execution of the puzzle element because it disrupted the flow of the story.

Imitation ultimately comes down to creativity. Authors need to find ways in which to use inspirational novels as a starting point to their stories, but not to the point where it can be misinterpreted as plagiarism. This is a trending style that goes on in contemporary culture, and whether or not an author is successful ultimately depends on the readers and their perspectives. Agatha Christie opened up pathways for upcoming authors in the decades that followed the success of her novel to an author like Gretchen McNeil. While McNeil took a lot of the basic plot, character and puzzle elements that Christie used, her novel was not a carbon copy. Rather, she managed to use these elements and change them into her own, succeeding in some and falling short in others. Overall, her emulation of Christie's greatest work was enticing enough to be a successful mystery/horror novel.

## **Works Cited**

Christie, Agatha. *And Then There Were None*. New York: Harper, 1939. Print.

McNeil, Gretchen. *Ten*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012. Print.