In the spring of 1930, a romance between a 40-year-old Agatha and 26-year-old Max blossomed. Among the ancient city mounds (*tells*), long expanses of arid desert, and across five digging seasons, Agatha and Max manage to travel to over 10 cities like Beirut, Tadmur, Chagar Bazar, Qamishli, Aleppo, and Ugarit. Max, our Khwaja, surveys countless tells and discovers pottery and clay tablets written in cuneiform, and Agatha, our Khatūn, manages several households, develops film taken of the archaeological sites, and still manages to get in some professional writing. We meet a whole host of very real, very animated characters in her account of their life on the tells, introducing us to various religions, foods, landscapes, and ways of life.

The pair would be together for 46 years and would travel to such now famous archaeological sites as Nimrud (Assyrian), Ur (Sumerian) and Nineveh (Assyrian). During this time, Max would end up teaching at London University, and created the British Institute of Persian Studies. Agatha would complete 72 books and become the world’s best-selling author.
The book's title, a quote from verse three of the White Knight's poem, *Haddocks' Eyes* from chapter eight of *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) by Lewis Carroll, is also word play on the word "Tell," used to describe an archaeological mound or site.

I'll tell thee everything I can:  
There's little to relate.  
I saw an aged aged man,  
A-sitting on a gate.  
"Who are you, aged man?" I said,  
"And how is it you live?"  
And his answer trickled through my head,  
Like water through a sieve.

He said "I look for butterflies  
That sleep among the wheat:  
I make them into mutton-pies,  
And sell them in the street.  
I sell them unto men," he said,  
"Who sail on stormy seas;  
And that's the way I get my bread --  
A trifle, if you please."

But I was thinking of a plan  
To dye one's whiskers green,  
And always use so large a fan  
That they could not be seen.  
So, having no reply to give  
To what the old man said,  
I cried "Come, tell me how you live!"  
And thumped him on the head.
Discussion

• What did you think of Agatha’s descriptions of various servants and assistants?

• Many people (agents, publishers, family friends) cautioned Christie against publishing this chronicle. Why do you think that is?

• What knowledge did you gain from this light-hearted archaeological jaunt through the Middle East?

• The British newspaper, The Observer, initially reviewed Christie’s book as “flippant...though a contribution to literature on the Middle East” (Nov. 2, 1946). Why flippant?

• Who was your favorite character (real-life person)? Who did you find yourself fascinated with, wanting to know more about?

• Have you ever traveled to Syria and Iraq?

• Baghdad Museum, then and now

• What is the status today of the Treasures of Nimrud?

Further Reading:

