
Opening Extract from...

The Golden Age of Murder

Written by Martin Edwards

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The Golden Age of Murder

The Mystery of the Writers who Invented the Modern Detective Story

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Introduction

The origins of my quest to solve the mysteries of the Detection Club date back to when I was eight years old. A rich American called John L. Snyder II, who retired to the picturesque Cheshire village of Great Budworth after making a fortune in Hollywood, hosted the annual summer fete at his country house, Sandicroft. He decided to show a film in a marquee in Sandicroft's extensive grounds – and set about pulling strings with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. A remarkably persuasive man, Snyder secured permission to present the world premiere of MGM's brand new movie, *Murder Most Foul*.

This stranger-than-fiction initiative guaranteed publicity in the local and national Press. Snyder's ambition was demonstrated by his search for a celebrity to open the fete. He began by approaching Brigitte Bardot, but when Brigitte declared herself unavailable (did this surprise him? I wonder), he changed tack and recruited the star of the film – Margaret Rutherford. My family lived near Great Budworth, and my parents took me to the fete as a birthday treat. So many people wanted to go that it was impossible to drive there. A fleet of coaches bussed everyone to Sandicroft.

I can still picture that afternoon among the crowds under the July sun. And I remember the excitement as a noisy helicopter circled overhead, coming in to land on a cleared patch of lawn before disgorging Margaret Rutherford, alias Miss Jane Marple. After much queuing, we squeezed into a showing of the film. Already I loved reading and writing stories, but this was my first exposure to Agatha Christie, and I was thrilled by the confection of clues and red herrings, suspects and surprises. I went home in a daze, dreaming that one day I would concoct a story that fascinated others as this light-hearted murder puzzle had

fascinated me. I soon discovered the film bore little resemblance to the novel on which it was based, but that didn't matter. I was hooked.

How fitting that my love of traditional detective fiction was inspired by a country house party in a village reminiscent of St Mary Mead. That evening, I took from a bookshelf a paperback copy of *The Murder at the Vicarage,* and my fate was sealed. I devoured every book Christie wrote, and tried to learn anything I could about the woman whose story-telling entranced me. In the mid-Sixties, with no internet, no social media, and not much of a celebrity culture (apart from Bardot and Margaret Rutherford, of course), finding out more about Christie proved surprisingly difficult. Eventually I moved on to other crime writers, ranging from past masters like Dorothy L. Sayers and Anthony Berkeley to Julian Symons, then at the cutting edge of the present. From Symons' masterly study of the genre, *Bloody Murder*, I learned about the Detection Club, an elite but mysterious group of crime writers over which Sayers, Christie and Symons presided for nearly forty years.

Years later, I became a published detective novelist, writing books set in the here and now. A delightful moment came when a letter arrived out of the blue from Simon Brett, President of the Detection Club, explaining that the members had elected me by secret ballot to join their number. Subsequently, I was invited to become the Detection Club's first Archivist.

The only snag was that there were no archives. Although the Detection Club once possessed a Minute Book, it has not been seen since the Blitz. Even the extensive Club library, packed with rare treasures, had been sold off.

At the time of writing, there seems little hope of ever recovering all the missing papers, in the absence of one of those lucky breaks from which fictional detectives so often benefit. But inevitably the loss of the Club's records of its early days sharpened my curiosity. To a lover of detective stories, what more teasing challenge than to solve the mysteries of the people who formed the original Detection Club? I quickly discovered far more puzzles, especially about Christie

and other early members of the Club, than I expected. I began to question my own assumptions, as well as those of critics whose judgements were often based on guesswork and prejudice.

My investigation sent me travelling around Britain, as I tracked down and interviewed relatives of former Detection Club members and other witnesses to the curious case of the Golden Age of murder. Some of the people I talked to joined in with the detective work, and the more I discovered, the more I came to believe that the story of the Club and its members demanded to be told. I explored remote libraries and dusty second bookshops, and badgered people in Australia, the United States, Japan and elsewhere in the hunt for answers. Sometimes memories proved maddeningly vague or erroneously definite. Biographies of Club members were packed with as many inconsistencies as the testimony of witnesses with something to hide.

I met with much kindness and generosity, often from those I shall never meet in person. One or two who knew secrets about the Detection Club did not want to be traced, or to recall past traumas, and this I understood. A couple of times, I reined in my curiosity when the quest risked becoming intrusive or hurtful – as Poirot recognises at the end of *Murder on the Orient Express*, sometimes the truth is not the only thing that matters. Exciting breakthroughs spurred me on, as when two clues, one in the form of an email address, and another discovered on my own bookshelves, led me to identify someone with personal knowledge of the dark side of one of my prime suspects.

Luck often played a part, as when I stumbled across Dorothy L. Sayers' personal copy of the transcript of the murder trial described in *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, with pages of detailed notes in her neat hand recording her own interpretation of the evidence. Authors' inscriptions in rare novels supplied fresh leads, and even an apparent confession by Agatha Christie to 'crimes unsuspected, not detected'. The chance acquisition of a signed book led to my learning of a secret diary written in a unique code.

Clues to extraordinary personal secrets were hidden in the writers' work. I sifted through the evidence with an open mind, and as real- life detectives often find, I needed to use my imagination from time to time, to fill in the inevitable gaps. Studying the work of two writers over the course of a decade and a half of their lives helped to build a convincing picture of their doomed love affair, and to understand a strange relationship that changed their lives, but has eluded all previous literary critics and their biographers. Many of the finest Golden Age sleuths sometimes relied on intuition, and what was good enough for Father Brown and Miss Marple was good enough for me. In the end, I uncovered enough of the truth to round up the prime suspects for a suitable *denouement* in the final chapter.

How can one discuss detective stories without giving away the endings? Some reference books contain 'spoiler alerts', but these can result in a fragmented read. I've tried not to give too much away, although in the case of a few books, readers will be able to put the pieces together.

My respect for the earliest members of the Detection Club did not diminish as I spotted flaws in their detectives' reasoning, or chanced upon curious and sometimes embarrassing incidents in their own lives. On the contrary, I came to respect their prowess in skating over thin ice, in fiction and in everyday life. They were writing during a dangerous period in our history, years when recovery from the shocking experience of one war became overshadowed by dread of another. At this distance of time, we can see that Detection Club members had much more to say about the world in which they lived than either they acknowledged or critics have appreciated. They entertained their readers royally, but there was more to their work than that.

Even the most gifted Golden Age detectives did not work in isolation, and my own investigation benefited enormously from the help and hard work of others. My profoundest thanks go to Christie, Sayers, Berkeley and all their colleagues, who have given me so much pleasure – not only in their writing, but in the puzzles

they posed as I followed their trail. That trail reaches back to the long ago July afternoon when I was lucky enough to see Miss Marple make her improbable descent from the skies, and discover a new world which, from that day to this, I have found utterly spellbinding.

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The Ritual in the Dark

On a summer evening in 1937, a group of men and women gathered in darkness to perform a macabre ritual. They had invited a special guest to witness their ceremony. She was visiting London from New Zealand and a thrill of excitement ran through her as the appointed time drew near. She loved drama, and at home she worked in the theatre. Now she felt as tense as when the curtain was about to rise. To be a guest at this dinner was a special honour. What would happen next she could not imagine.

Striking to look at, the New Zealander was almost six feet tall, with dark, close-set eyes. Elegant yet enigmatic, she exuded a quiet, natural charm that contrasted with her flamboyant dress sense and artistic taste for the exotic. Fond of wearing men's clothes, smart slacks, a tie and a beret, this evening she had opted for feminine finery, her favourite fur wrap and extravagant costume jewellery. In common with her hosts, she had a passion for writing detective stories. Like them, she guarded her private life jealously.

Until tonight, she had only known these people from reading about them – and from reading their books. Many were household names, distinguished in politics, education, journalism, religion, and science, as well as literature. Most were British, a handful came from overseas. A young American was here, and so were the Australian granddaughter of a French marquis, and an elderly Hungarian

countess who each year made a special journey for the occasion, travelling to England from her home in Monte Carlo.

The ritual was preceded by a lavish banquet in an opulent dining room. As the wine flowed, the visitor fought to conquer her nerves. Her escort, a discreet young Englishman, attentive and admiring, did his best to put her at ease. The food was superb, and the company convivial, but she preferred to let others talk rather than chatter herself. Sipping at her coffee, she half-listened to the speeches. At last came the moment she was waiting for. Everyone rose, and the party retired to another room. At the far end stood a large chair, almost like a throne. On the right side was a little table, and on the left, a lectern and a flagon of wine, its mouth covered with cloth.

All of a sudden, the lights went out, plunging the room into darkness. As if at a given signal, everyone else swept out through the door, leaving the woman from New Zealand and her companion alone. She became conscious of a faint chill in the air. Both of them were afraid to break the silence. As the moments ticked away, they dared to exchange a few words, speaking in whispers, as if in church.

Without warning, a door swung open. The Orator had arrived.

Resplendent in scarlet and black robes, and wearing pince-nez, a statuesque woman entered the room. She marched towards the lectern, holding a single taper to light the way. As she mounted the rostrum, the New Zealander saw that, in the folds of her gown, the Orator had secreted a side-arm. The visitor caught her breath. In the gloom, she could not identify the weapon. Was it a pistol, or a six-shooter?

Stern and purposeful, the Orator lit a candle. She gave no hint that she knew anyone was watching. At her command, a sombre procession of men and women in evening dress filed into the room. In the flickering candle-light, the visitor glimpsed unsmiling faces. Four members of the group carried flaming torches. Others clutched lethal weapons: a rope, a blunt instrument, a sword, and a phial

of poison. A giant of a man brought up the rear. On the cushion that he carried, beneath a black cloth, squatted a grinning human skull.

The New Zealander was spellbound. The Orator cleared her throat and began to speak. She administered a lengthy oath to a burly man in his sixties. This secretive and elitist gathering had elected him to preside over their affairs, and he pledged to honour the rules of the game they played:

> '*To do and detect all crimes by fair and reasonable means; to conceal no vital clues from the reader; to honour the King's English . . . and to observe the oath of secrecy in all matters communicated to me within the brotherhood of the Club*.'

As the ritual approached its end, the Orator lifted her revolver. Giving a faint smile, she fired a single shot. In the enclosed space, the noise was deafening. Her colleagues let out blood-curdling cries and waved their weapons in the air.

The eyes of the skull lit up the blackness, shining with a fierce red glow.

Stunned, the New Zealander found herself unable to speak. Her companion, familiar with the eccentric humour of crime writers, laughed like a hyena.

The visitor from New Zealand was Ngaio Marsh, who became one of her country's most admired detective novelists, as well as a legendary theatre director. Her escort, Edmund Cork, was her literary agent, and he also represented Agatha Christie. The Orator who led the procession was Dorothy L. Sayers, and the bearer of the skull was another popular detective novelist, John Rhode. The satiric ritual followed a script so elaborate that Sayers, its author, thoughtfully supplied an explanatory diagram. The occasion was the installation of Edmund Clerihew Bentley as second President of the Detection Club.

Ngaio Marsh remembered that night for the rest of her life. Long after she returned home, she dined out on stories about what she had seen, embellishing

details as time passed, and memory played tricks. In one account, she identified the setting for the ritual as Grosvenor House; in her biography, written in old age, she said it was the Dorchester. She also made conflicting claims about whether or not she met Agatha Christie that night. Detective novelists, like their characters, often make suspect witnesses and unreliable narrators.

The Detection Club was an elite social network of writers whose work earned a reputation for literary excellence, and exerted a profound long-term influence on storytelling in fiction, film and television. Their impact continues to be felt, not only in Britain but throughout the world, in the twenty-first century. Yet a mere thirty-nine members were elected between the Club's inception in 1930 and the end of the Second World War. The process of selecting suitable candidates for membership was rigorous, sometimes bizarrely so. The founders wanted to ensure that members had produced work of 'admitted merit' – a code for excluding the likes of 'Sapper' and Sydney Horler, whose thrillers starring Bulldog Drummond and Tiger Standish earned a huge readership, but were crude and jingoistic.

Those thirty-nine men and women were as extraordinary an assortment of characters as the cast of *Murder on the Orient Express*. They included some of the country's most famous authors of popular fiction: not only the creators of Hercule Poirot and Lord Peter Wimsey, but also authors better known for writing about the Scarlet Pimpernel or Winnie-the-Pooh. Detection Club members came from all walks of life. Several had fought in the First World War and suffered life-changing harm, some played a prominent part in British political life. Members ranged from right-wing Tory to red-blooded Marxist, and everything in between. The aristocracy was represented, along with the middle and working classes, and the Anglican and Catholic clergy.

The Club's first President, G. K. Chesterton, is currently regarded as a potential candidate for canonisation by the Pope – even though today he is remembered less for his spirituality than his detective fiction. The lives of his

colleagues, for all their surface respectability, were much less saintly. Several were promiscuous, two had unacknowledged children. Long before homosexual acts between men were decriminalized, there were gay and lesbian members, as well as a husband and wife literary duo – one of whom nursed a passion for a young man who eventually became leader of the Labour Party. And one cherished a secret fantasy about murdering a man who stood between him and the woman he adored.

The movers and shakers in the Detection Club were young writers who at first pretended to write according to a set of light-hearted 'rules'. This symptomized the 'play fever' that swept through Britain after the First World War, when games as different as contract bridge and mah-jongg captured the popular imagination, and crossword puzzles were all the rage. After the loss of millions of lives in combat, and then during the Spanish flu epidemic, games offered escape from the horrors of war-time – as well as from the bleak realities of peace. Economic misery seemed never-ending. The national debt ballooned, and politicians imposed an age of austerity. Industrial output fell, and so did consumer spending. The cost of living soared, and so did unemployment. The threat of slashed wages for miners led to Britain's one and only General Strike, and the ruling classes had to cling to wealth and power by their fingertips. The sun had not quite set on the British Empire, but this was the twilight of the imperial era. While Bright Young Things partied the night away, millions of ordinary people couldn't sleep for worrying about how to pay their bills.

Detective stories offered readers pleasure at a time when they feared for the future. As the Wall Street Crash brought the Roaring Twenties to a shuddering end, writers prided themselves on coming up with fresh ways of disguising whodunit or howdunit, but the most gifted novelists itched to do more, to explore human relationships and the complications of psychology. The work of Sigmund Freud, himself a detective fiction fan, became influential. The social mores of the Thirties prevented novelists from writing graphic sex scenes, but strong sexual

undercurrents are evident in many of the best detective stories of the Thirties, above all in the extraordinary final novels of Anthony Berkeley and Hugh Walpole. Increasingly, Detection Club members relished breaking the so-called 'rules' of their game. They experimented with the form of the novel, deploying untrustworthy narrators as well as unexpected culprits. Their books reflected social attitudes and political change, more than they intended, and more than critics have realized.

Three remarkable people became the Club's leading lights. In the vanguard was Sayers, brilliant and idiosyncratic as any maverick detective. By her side stood Berkeley, crime fiction's Jekyll and Hyde – suave and scintillating one minute, sardonic and sinister the next. And then there was Agatha Christie, a quiet, pleasant woman who was easy to read unless you wanted to know what was going on in her mind.

Christie's legendary ingenuity with plot was matched by Berkeley's biting cynicism about conventional justice and his obsession with criminal psychology. Sayers, a woman as forceful as she was erudite, believed the detective story could become something more than mere light entertainment. 'If there is any serious aim behind the avowedly frivolous organisation of the Detection Club,' she said shortly after its formation, 'it is to keep the detective story up to the highest standard that its nature permits, and to free it from the bad legacy of sensationalism, clap-trap and jargon with which it was unhappily burdened in the past.'

Appearances are deceptive. When we look at pictures of Christie and Sayers today, we usually see the women in their later years: respectable, well-upholstered, grandmotherly. The few published photographs of the publicity-hating Berkeley show a dapper fellow, wearing a trim moustache in his younger days, bald and pipe-smoking in later life. How tempting to fall into the trap of dismissing them as strait-laced middle-class English people. Yet in private, they

led extraordinary lives and endured disastrous marriages. All three took secrets to the grave.

Their novels are often sneered at as 'cosy', and the claim that their characters were made from cardboard has become a lazy critical cliché. The very idea that detective fiction between the wars represented a 'Golden Age' seems like the misty-eyed nostalgia of an aged romantic hankering after a past that never existed. Many argue that the quality of crime fiction written today matches, or surpasses, that of any other period. But today's writers often owe something to their predecessors, and the term 'the Golden Age of detective fiction' was popularized, not by some genteel old lady or retired brigadier, but by John Strachey, a young Marxist who later became Minister of War in the post-war Labour government.

Strachey recognised that the *best* detective novels of the Thirties were exhilarating, innovative and unforgettable. They explored miscarriages of justice, forensic pathology and serial killings long before these topics became fashionable (and before the term 'serial killer' was invented). Many of the finest books defied stereotypes. The received wisdom is that Golden Age fiction set out to reassure readers by showing order restored to society, and plenty of orthodox novels did just that. But many of the finest bucked the trend, and ended on a note of uncertainty or paradox. In some, people were executed for crimes they did not commit; in others, murderers escaped unpunished. The climax of one of Berkeley's novels was so shocking that when Alfred Hitchcock came to film it, even the legendary master of suspense, the man who would direct *Psycho*, lost his nerve. He substituted a final scene that was a feeble cop-out in comparison to Berkeley's dark and horrific vision.

Sayers, Berkeley and Christie came to detective fiction young – in their late twenties and early thirties. All three were full of energy and imagination, fizzing with fresh ideas. Each was an obsessive risk-taker. The First World War changed them, as it changed Britain. After the bloodshed of the trenches, writers craved escapism just as much as their readers. Though their stories often seem as

artificial as they are ingenious, Sayers, Christie and Berkeley were intent on transforming the genre. Along the way, they fought against personal catastrophes, and suffered spells of deep despair. The lonely nature of their work – no publicity tours, no fan conventions, no glitzy awards ceremonies – contributed to their torments. Thanks to Detection Club meetings, writers found new friends who shared their literary enthusiasms. Not only did members eat, drink and talk together – they wrote and broadcast together, raising money by collaborating on crime stories in unique cross-media initiatives. For Sayers and Christie in particular, the Detection Club became a lifeline.

Christie's controversial eleven-day disappearance in 1926 is by far the most high profile of the numerous disasters that befell Club members, affecting their writing as well their lives. Much as they wanted to promote their books, they were determined to keep their personal lives out of the public gaze. Many hid their private agonies in a way impossible in the age of paparazzi and Press intrusion, and of blogs, Facebook and Twitter. Beneath the facade of middle class respectability lay human stories as complex and enthralling as any fiction.

Christie, Sayers and Berkeley were fascinated by murder in real life. True crime stories influenced and inspired them. And they did much more than borrow plot elements from actual cases. There is a long tradition of mystery writers undertaking detective work for themselves – from Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, to P. D. James's re-evaluation of the murder of Julia Wallace, and Patricia Cornwell's investment of two million dollars in her efforts to establish that Walter Sickert really was Jack the Ripper. Other than Conan Doyle, however, none have investigated real-life mysteries with the zeal of the Detection Club in the Thirties.

Anyone researching the Club must navigate a labyrinth of blind alleys and wrong turnings. The challenge is to unravel three sets of mysteries – about the

books, the real-life murder puzzles, and the dark secrets of the writers' personal lives. All are woven together in a tangled web.

The simpler riddles are literary. Who wrote the first serial killer mysteries? What game did Club members play with a superintendent from Scotland Yard? Who pioneered the novel of psychological suspense? How did Anthony Berkeley anticipate *Lord of the Flies*?

Trickier questions arise about real-life crimes. Did a young woman's horrific death trigger Berkeley's infatuation with a married magistrate? Why was Christie haunted by the drowning of the man who adapted her work for the stage? What convinced Sayers of the innocence of a man convicted of battering his wife to death with a poker? And what did she make of the blood-stained garment that supplied a vital clue in the murder investigated by the legendary Inspector Whicher?

Detection Club members seldom confessed to writing about themselves, or the increasingly fragile social order to which they belonged. Yet they scattered hints throughout their writing, just as their fictional culprits made mistakes that gave away their clever schemes. We can deduce more from reading between the lines of the books than the authors realized.

Which novelist wrote a secret diary in an unbreakable code? How did two famous writers conduct a forbidden love affair through hidden messages in their stories? Why did Sayers and Berkeley suddenly abandon detective fiction at the height of their fame? Clues, outlandish as any ever picked up by Poirot, lurk in the unlikeliest settings – an inscribed first edition, a unique form of shorthand, a murderous fantasy transformed into fiction, even the abdication of a king.

Christie once hinted she was guilty of 'crimes unsuspected, not detected.' Sayers found herself confronting a blackmailer. And Berkeley fantasized about murdering the man who stood between him and happiness. Searching for the truth about this gifted trio is as enthralling as any hunt for fictional culprits.

After a series of economic earthquakes on a scale not seen for generations, uncanny parallels exist between our time and the years between the wars. This is the perfect moment for a cold case review of the Detection Club: to unmask the Golden Age writers and their work, against the backdrop of the extraordinary times in which they lived.