

Have his carcass

D.Sayers

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I recall the book from the ferry on my return from my first trip to England in the summer of 1966. Did I read it back then? Was my English good enough to enjoy it at that stage? I do remember reading about the lovers quarrel between Wimsey and Harriet Vane not really understanding it, young as I was, but did I really read through it? Nothing really rings a bell, except possibly the fact that there was no body. I must have quit early though, as the murdered body does show up later on in the book. Or did I perhaps read it some years later, I do recall reading some Sayers at the Gymnasium. Anyway I do not remember anything. Except one thing. On page 262 (I made a mental note of it) I come across a police man of whom it is remarked that he was able to add three digit numbers in his head without problem. This remark I remember well. Can the author have used it repeatedly in her books? I doubt it. But this remark, so mysteriously remembered, proves that I at least read most of the book, and if you make such an investment in a detective story you usually endure to the end to at least see who is the murderer, or at least to see how the author will wrap it all up. But how come I seem to have completely forgotten it, save for that chance remark (and why did it stick in my memory? because I thought of the skill as being rather modest and one I easily could acquire, if I in fact had not already done so).

It shows the main weakness of detective stories, once you have read them, you tend to forget about them rather quickly. There might be more to the story that the mystery to be resolved, and that might possibly stick, but that is rather unusual. Detective stories are like junk food (even the classy ones), seductive at the time of devouring, but give no lasting nourishment. How come? Because all the mysteries of such stories are not only made up, but necessarily artificially so. The problems to be resolved do not really correspond to something real. A real problem challenges your imagination and you cannot just make up things as you go along, as you can with a detective story. To write one is not really solving a problem, at least not the ostensible one, although it gives all the trappings. To make it look real, is another problem, a meta problem, and it is solved well if you keep on reading, but as to the ostensible one, there is no deeper engagement. How different from mathematics where you tend to remember over the years. The solution to a criminal riddle is always something of a cheat. The author has all the cards on her hand, and is also allowed to make up new cards. How can you be engaged in a game in which you can change the rules as you go along?

The novel is rather long and a bit tedious. An apparent suicide which may not be a suicide after all, in view of all the conspiracies surrounding it. You try different scenarios, but they all stumble on the fact that the murder seems to have been committed at an impossible time because of the freely running blood. The solution is that the victim is a hemophilia, his blood would simply not clot, so his unclotted blood proves nothing, i.e. excludes nothing. But to this insight, which in retrospect does not seem that surprising,

we are almost done. Before that the one little mystery after the other thrown in our way. And those ciphers to be tested. It all seems a little bit like padding to me.

What to remember? That only people with criminal intent are intent upon establishing water-proof alibis. If someone has too good an alibi, especially around a time of murder not publicly known, be suspicious. Is it not this way most criminals are caught, by knowing too much?

The book must have been written around 1930 and set to depict that time. Thus when I read it, I was closer in time to the time of writing than I am now to the time of reading. Still, you read a detective story partly out of nostalgia. Sherlock Holmes is definitely read that way. And of course southern England almost ninety years ago does present an idyllic picture. But still the world of 1930, between the wars, is not that terribly different from the world today, at least not as different as it was from the 1840's. There are airplanes and there are cars on the roads. Radios, if no TV yet. There is an underground and cinema halls, and even record players. And of course telephones, be they fixed. Certainly not that much difference between the 30's and the 60's with which I was familiar. The big difference is that in the early 30's there were still people around who had been born in the 1830's and that is rather remarkable if you think about it. It was modernity rooted in distant history. Somehow anchored in the way our present is not.

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