

Whose Body?

D.L.Sayers

January 10-15, 2020

This is the first Lord Peter Wimsey novels Sayers wrote. One suspects that it was an experiment and that she probably had no intention to continue it. Clearly this is a kind of parody of a crime story (one thinks of the Swedish writer Åke Holmberg and his Ture Sventon books for children). One should not forget that the highly successful Sherlock Holmes stories were not that distant in time when she wrote this attempt one hundred years ago. (Is there not less difference in quotidian life between 2020 and 1920 than between 1920 and 1820? There are cars, telephones even airplanes already at the time). Can this novel be taken seriously? In fact is it even meant to be taken seriously? Just a regular spoof? Obviously there is a meta-element in the story, namely that of commenting on detective fiction, thereby using the somewhat cheap exit-valve of irony to distance yourself from the craft, having a conversation with the reader, beyond that of the story itself. The story should not be taken seriously, the author is clearly better than she pretends to be. Yet it has its charms, although the murder plot is truly ridiculous and almost painfully contrived. The protagonist Wimsey is still a crude caricature as is his relation with his butler (one thinks of P.G.Wodehouse and the Wooster-Jeeves relationship which started to be published at the time.). The inspector Parker has not yet become a brother-in-law, for that a sister has to be fashioned out of somebody's ribs, but that is no challenge for a novelist.

The story involves a number of literary experiments. The butler is inspired to write a long letter of report in the form of a dialogue, and the conclusion of the story is not through Wimsey himself, but through a very long letter by the murderer confessing his sin, not out of any regret or ruefulness, but surely to make sure that no-one would miss how clever he had been. The old story again, some brilliant individual, often a scientist, deciding that morality is only for lesser individuals, and that he himself stands above such petty things. And what better and more inspiring way of showing your contempt than to commit the perfect murder. But even perfect murders may go astray due to unforeseeable accidents. In fact if you have no relation to the victim, and thus no real discernible motive, it is rather easy to get away with murder, pace the usual run of detective stories. In fact some people can make a living out of it, they are of course known as hit men.

Not much can be said of the story, and you certainly do not want to give the murder away, even if he is given away rather early in the book, flaunting some of the unwritten rules of conventional crime-fiction. But there are some interesting commentary. One of the protagonist maintains that he had no recollection whatsoever of what he did say on Thursday the previous week, and Wimsey puts a few leading questions to him, and it turns out that he actually remembers a lot. This is the task of a skilled interrogator to draw out of a witness a wealth of true and significant detail. If the interrogator is too skillful he will manage even more significant details at the prize of not necessarily have them truthful.

So why is crime fiction so popular? There are two very obvious reasons. One is that

of the plot, which may, if well-done, keep the reader in suspense and make him or her turn the pages expectantly. There is always great satisfaction in resolving mysteries, this is what fundamental science is all about, although it is seldom presented in that way. And secondly there are descriptions of milieus and people giving if read in retrospect a sense of time and its spirit. As noted there are some reference to the period just after the war, Wimsey appears to suffer from shell shock, an affliction which seems to have been in fashion for some years and then gone out of it. And of course if you write a series of crime novels, as Sayers would eventually do, there is the delight in returning to old friends.

Sayers seems to have had a somewhat interesting sex-life as a young woman, although that is hard to believe looking at portraits of her in her older age, when she appears somewhat prim. She wrote poetry, translated Dante into English verse, and was also the author of religious tracts. The Wimsey matter was obviously a digression, but a very profitable one, one suspects.

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