he was literally, a dwarf, and his figure, on the whole, was so deformed, that a stranger could scarcely look at him without shuddering...his body was short but of amazing bulk and was supported on limbs which, to judge from appearances, were quite inadequate for their burden. To the huge head which reposed on his short neck... Han d’Island is described thus: “A little man short and thick set...his beard was red and bushy, and his head... seemed to be thickly covered with hair of a similar colour, his mouth was large, with very thick lips; his teeth white and pointed with wide spaces between them, his nose was curved like the beak of an eagle, his grey blue eyes.” Neither of these descriptions shows any clear, clinically recognisable details, and Quasimodo bears little physical resemblance to either; the common thread being only one of deformity. Hugo himself gives no clue in his autobiographical writings to his model for Quasimodo. No recognisable model exists in his drawings, nor is the subject mentioned in many biographies and studies of his life and work.

Did Quasimodo ever live?

Victor Hugo was only 29 when Notre-Dame de Paris was published in 1831, but he had begun to consider the book as early as 1828. Until that time he had always lived in Paris, except for brief stays both in Italy and Spain with his military father. Although Hugo may have encountered some such deformed victim of Von Recklinghausen’s disease while on these foreign visits, it is more likely that he encountered his model in Paris. Had such a person held any prominent position in the public life of the city when the book was published, however, he would probably have become as notorious in his time as the elephant man was many years later. The model that Hugo used for his portrayal might have already died when the book was published, and any person with deformities of the severity that Hugo attributes to his central character would probably have a much reduced life expectancy. Although the mystery of who it was that Hugo portrayed remains unsolved, the portrait that he made so unforgettable has incontrovertibly conferred upon the unfortunate subject, whoever he was, a posthumous immortality.

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Unsuitable reading?

L E BÖTTIGER

BMA House, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and built on the site of a house where Charles Dickens lived in the mid-1800s, is—as you all know—located at Tavistock Square in London. In the same location, if you look carefully, you will also find the Cadaver Club, a typical British institution founded by men for men—with an interest in murder. The club is exclusively masculine, women are neither admitted as members nor entertained. The committee takes the view that their presence would hardly compensate for the expense of putting in a second set of lavatories. But books do not need toilets and even if lady writers are excluded their books are not—they are fairly well represented on the shelves of the club library.

Well, the Cadaver Club does not exist in reality, only in the third book by P D James, Unnatural Causes. The male members might give expense as their reason for excluding women—personally, I believe that their real reason was that they feared competition or even defeat. So many of the best crime writers of bygone and present days have been or are women that it should send cold chills up the backs of the male committee members. And who can give a good explanation for the high percentage of ladies in this morbid genre? Do ladies have more imagination than men, can they construct better plots? Or is murder their way of fighting for women’s liberation? I do not have an answer, but the list of lady writers is indeed impressive: Dorothy L Sayers, Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, and P D James, to mention only a few of the most outstanding.

Today P D James is highly acclaimed and ranked not only as an equal to Dorothy L Sayers and Agatha Christie but as their superior. The main reason is that her characters are much more human, less stereotyped, much more alive—until they get murdered—than those of her famous predecessors, in short, that she is a better writer. Since 1962 nine novels by Mrs James have seen the light of day—or is the dark of night more appropriate for crime novels? All are exciting; Innocent Blood is a thriller, all the others classic detective stories, many set in an environment for which Mrs James’s long experience as an administrator in Her Majesty’s National Health Service has formed the background. She skilfully varies her settings but in most of the books keeps to the sociomedical sphere so well known to her. In her company we visit a nursing school (Shroud for a Nightingale) and a forensic science laboratory (Death of an Expert Witness), we are taken to a private home for the young disabled (Black Tower) and to a fashionable psychiatric clinic (A Mind to Murder). In the vicinity of an Elizabethan manor house (Cover Her Face), the tranquility of which is shaken by murder, we find St Mary’s Refuge, a home for unmarried mothers, and in Innocent Blood we follow Philippa Palfrey into the visitor’s room of Melcombe Grange, a prison.

Mrs James has realised that there is hardly any murder method that will escape detection with today’s modern scientific techniques—if foul play is at all suspected—and in most cases lets her murderers, among them doctors and nurses, kill by simple and well established methods: the blunt instrument or the murderer’s own hands. She has a fancy for strangulation and suffocation—she says

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somewhere that those are female methods—and most of her victims die from lack of oxygen. The medically most interesting murder is figured out by laymen; she introduces a method that to my knowledge has not been used before, and I think it might work (Unnatural Causes). But I can’t understand how Adam Dalgleish, the detective, is not easier out how it was done—and even if I could, I wouldn’t tell you here.

And with her training Mrs James is generally medically correct. I have only found a few minor inaccuracies. There is something wrong—incorrectly wrong—with a heart in Unnatural Causes and I do not know where Mrs James has her shoulder blades. Mine are located so that it is impossible to strangle me by placing the hands “behind” them—they would squeeze only air (Cover Her Face). But anatomy is not easy—Marcel Proust got the first volume of his Remembrance of Things Past rejected by the publishers because André Gide got angry when he read about vertebrae in the forehead; no one has been able to explain how they got into Proust’s text. The Skull under the Skin—another of Mrs James’s titles, a quotation from T S Eliot—has no vertebrae on the outside even if the inside, in at least one disease condition (the Morgagni syndrome), might be thicker than usual. A small loss of blood like that suffered by Adam Dalgleish during his investigations in Nightingale House does not leave the mind preternaturally active. Even if modern medicine has reintroduced venesection as a therapeutic measure and been able to show that in certain situations it may in fact clear the mind, more blood has to be drawn than could possibly have been lost by the attacked detective.

A woman’s work

Are detective stories “unsuitable reading”? Is writing crime novels “an unsuitable job for a woman”? The title of P D James’s fifth book, published in 1972, was chosen for her girl sleuth, Cordelia Gray, who hears that expression so often that she gets angry at all the benevolent figures of both sexes who try to stop her from running the detective agency that she inherited from her dead companion. But perhaps they were right. In both instances (An Unsuitable Job for a Woman and The Skull under the Skin) when Miss Gray sets out to solve problems other than finding stray cats she finds herself, in both a figurative sense and literally, in deep water and nearly gets drowned.

The consultant physician who makes his rounds on the first page of The Black Tower was “gift wrapped in invisible foil and immune to the chance winds, frosts, and ungentle fingers which could mar more vulnerable perfectionings.” The fact is similar to mine when I wrote about Agatha Christie’s unchanged detectives “embedded and preserved for eternity in a transparent block of plastic.” But while Mrs James’s doctor is the caricature, her detective is very much alive. Like a true Deus ex machina Adam Dalgleish, “the Yard’s wonder boy,” descends from the clouds in a helicopter. He is promoted through the ranks—in the latest book he is a commander—“it reminds me of the Navy,” says an old lady. He is basically a sad man who has lost wife and newborn child; he writes poetry, of which we see next to nothing; and he has a love life, although his affairs are described as having been “detached, civilized, agreeable and undemanding” (The Black Tower).

One of Mrs James’s reviewers mentions that she uses “an overlay of lust.” Her characters have—like the detective—a sex life, not only the hot water bottles that George Mikes gave the English people instead of sex life in his book How to be an Alien. And they talk about it: “You seem fascinated by my love life, Commander,” says the beautiful Mrs Schofield to the detective, who in his turn speaks of Miss Calthorp, one of the authors in Unnatural Causes. “She writes about sex. Her sales won’t fall. You may not like the packaging, but the basic commodity will always be in demand.” And love and sex in many instances seem to be reduced to such a basic commodity. Cordelia Gray had found that “love making was overrated, not painful but surprising. The alienation between thought and action was so complete.” And Commander Dalgleish, to use his highest title so far—a new book by P D James is under way—makes similar remarks. His affairs had occupied “little of his time and somewhat more of his energy” (The Black Tower). And scientific officer Paul Middlemass (Death of an Expert Witness) reminds us of Chesterfield’s saying: “The expense is exorbitant, the position ridiculous and the pleasure transitory.”

“Doctors could be wrong”—Sir James, MD, did not privately believe that he would not be wrong. His assertion thus was a conventional gesture to modesty (The Skull under the Skin). But all MDs are not modest: “Vanity, Mr Dalgleish, is a surgeon’s besetting sin as subservience is a nurse’s.” (Shroud for a Nightingale). But again: “I believe in the possibility of a wrong diagnosis,” says Dalgleish, and he speaks from personal experience. He has just escaped from a diagnosis of acute leukaemia to that of an entirely benign glandular fever (The Black Tower). He has been presented with two certainties of death—by grave books and a false heartiness as well as by a superfluity of clinical tests”—and later “with a sentence of life, pronounced with less sophistry.”

“Now that death had replaced sex as the great unmentionable it had acquired its own pudency; to die when you had not yet become a nuisance and before your friends could reasonably raise the ritual chant of ‘happy release’ was in the worst of taste” (The Black Tower). But death and dying receive comment on several occasions, reflecting widely differing attitudes within the medical profession. Sir James, already referred to, hoped that “the patients should realise in their good time that they were dying”—evidently so that they would not put embarrassing questions to him—while his west end colleague, Dr Lionel Forbes-Denby, had his patients so firmly in his hands that they would never dare to die without his permission.

This short sample of quotations on medicine and murder methods, on doctors and detectives, on life (sex) and death serves only to point to Mrs James’s humorous and witty dialogue and her great ability to vary her settings and intrigues—she always takes good time and performs careful studies before she sits down to write. There is much of special interest to all in medicine and medical care. Her books definitely are not “unsuitable reading”—on the contrary. Many, even those who ordinarily look down on detective novels as a literary form, should try P D James. I am sure that they will not regret it.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

The war horse’s mouth

The temples of Pagan lie on a broad bend of the Irrawaddy, 150 miles south west of Mandalay. There are a thousand or more, some no bigger than an altar, others as high as St Paul’s. They rise from the dusty fields in majestic silence, toomboes to a prosperous Capitol that was ransacked by Kublai Khan and his tartar hordes in 1287. Each one is a personal tribute to a prosperous traderman to his god. Only imagination can picture the temples now. Even the most fertile mind is eventually frustrated by the stony silence of the stupas, relics of a bygone age.

I came across another relic many miles further south. His name was George. His tales were an aural link that peopleed the past for me; it was like listening through a stethoscope with a time warp. George was the resident entertainer in the men’s dormitory of the YMCA. Strong muscles once proudly held his military stance, now osteoarthritis and spondylolisthesis achieve the same effect. Somewhat upon his beam ends in recent years, he had in his time led a grand colonial life.

To my generation the second world war is the stuff of history books, Peckinpah movies, and “war mags.” I found it fascinating to have him flesh out the dry bones of the textbooks. George had spent a lot of the war in Burma. An officer with the Gurkhas, he had been on Stillwell’s retreat in May 1942. He later returned as one of Wingate’s chimdils. I was a willing audience for his anecdotes. Here were the very tales of my schoolboy war comics. The plots were the same (plenty of leeches, jungle booby traps, cyanide pellets tucked behind a molar, and manic Nippons) but the macho heroes were replaced by a轮胎 doggedness. History at school I found interminably dull. How much more interesting it was as part of an oral tradition.

George’s history is still with him. One time judge at the Turf Club, now distressed gentleman on an old army bunk, he was quick to make a joke of his time. Of course, he is chief of staff. 20 years ago he was in the next: it may never come.—WILLIAM CLAYTON, Yucatan, Mexico.