

THOSE DAMES! MURDER MOST FOUL

Coordinator: Anita Highton

In the period between the 1st and 2nd world wars, a talented group of women began publishing books that have remained popular since. Agatha Christie is the top selling novelist of all time, having sold more than 2 billion books. Why is this? Why did it happen? How can we solve the mystery of the writers who invented the modern detective story?

In this study group, we read and discuss books and stories, see films, and learn about the times and lives of these women: Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, and Josephine Tey.

Readings and other Materials: (Any edition acceptable)

Agatha Christie: *The ABC Murders*

Dorothy L. Sayers: *Strong Poison*

Margery Allingham: *The Crime at Black Dudley*

Ngaio Marsh: *A Man Lay Dead*

Josephine Tey: *The Daughter of Time*

Selected film clips

Selected short stories (in a coursepack, estimated cost \$10-15.00)

Anita Highton is retired dermatologist who has been reading mysteries since junior high school. She has coordinated study groups in Great Decisions and Behind the scenes of New York Museum exhibitions.

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Session 1: Introduction

Historical context, The Detection Club, overview of authors and works

Sessions 2 and 3: Agatha Christie

Biography

The ABC Murders

1-2 selected short stories

2 – 3 film clips

Discussion: What are the reasons for Christie being the most popular novelist of all time? How does she reveal her clues? Does she adhere to the rules of The Detection Club? How has she influenced other mystery writers?

Sessions 4 and 5: Dorothy L. Sayers

Biography, including Oxford studies and degree

Strong Poison

1-2 short stories

Selected film clips

Discussion of the unusual combination of her university study of classics and mystery writing. Does this give her works more gravitas? What might have motivated Sayers to write mysteries? What do we learn of society from her descriptions of Lord Peter Wimsey and his royal family?

Session 6: How did they die?

The Golden Age mystery writers did not revel in gore, or try to shock her readers with gratuitous violence (in Kathryn Harkup's *A is for Arsenic. The Poisons of Agatha Christie*). Many victims died from poisoning in her books, as well as in the books of other authors we will be reading. Popular poisons include arsenic, cyanide, strychnine, etc. Other lethal strategies, among others, include stabbing and pushing off a cliff.

Discussion of influence of these mysteries on later mystery writers. Is the trend toward more graphic violence? Why have these authors selected these methods of murder? Was there an influence of World War I?

Sessions 7 and 8: Margery Allingham

Biography

The Crime at Black Dudley

Discussion: How does the author pick her detective? Has Allingham decided this with her first book with Albert Campion?

What about the servant/sidekicks in these novels?

Session 9 and 10: Ngaio Marsh

Biography: a New Zealander, made a Dame Commander of the OBE in 1966

A Man Lay Dead

Clips from BBC productions (if possible). .

Discussion: Why is she included as one of the 4 original “Queens of Crime” who dominated the crime fiction genre in the Golden Age of the 1920s and 1930s? How does the fact that she was a New Zealander affect her novels?

Session 11: Josephine Tey

Pseudonym of Elizabeth Mackintosh Also wrote as Gordon Daviot; under this name wrote plays with a historical theme

Little known of her biography

Created Scotland Yard Inspector Alan Grant.

The Daughter of Time

Discussion: This novel has been named in one list as the best mystery of all time. Why? Is the study group in agreement? Should a mystery novel attempt to rewrite history?

Session 12: Recap and summary

Discussion of the semester’s readings and favorite authors/books/films

Discussion (if time) of The Mousetrap by Agatha Christie, the longest running play in history. What makes it so popular? Why do these novels continue to be so popular?

Supplemental materials in addition to the novels and short stories:

Excerpts from The Golden Age of Murder by Martin Edwards

A is for Arsenic: The Poisons of Agatha Christie by Kathryn Harkup

Make Mine a Mystery: A Reader’s Guide to Mystery and Detective Fiction by Gary Warren Niebuhr

Great Tales of Detection: Nineteen Stories, chosen by Dorothy L. Sayers

Reference Guide to Mystery and Detective Fiction by Richard J. Bleiler

The Oxford Book of English Detective Stories, edited by Patricia Craig

Ten Women of Mystery by Earl F. Bagnall

Plus: additional references as needed

The selection of the novels may change before the semester starts.