

WHO CARES WHO KILLED HIM?

Leading Critic Attacks Detective Fiction

HERE is heresy. The reviewers are attacking detective fiction. One of our readers has sent us a copy of the *New Yorker*, in which Edmund Wilson, one of the best critics in America, and many think in the English-speaking world, opens a broadside on Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, and even on Ngaio Marsh. Others have questioned the place of such writers in literature. Wilson calls them dull and unreadable. We quote some of his most sweeping comments.

But for the reinforcement of the faithful we quote first from the *Times Literary Supplement*. Here is a paragraph from a recent Leading Article:

A dozen new detective stories are noticed in this week's *Literary Supplement*. Almost every copy of every title is now circulating like a loving-cup down a line of readers stretching from here to Burma. These readers are facetiously called "addicts," as if their craving for this type of book were somehow morbid; as if it were unnatural for man's moral and intellectual faculties to fasten upon images of retributive justice working solely through the human agency of Logic, and pursuing, with no help from the pagan Eumenides, criminals who are quite sure they have got away with murder. If anyone doubts that a good detective story represents the resistance to everything that culminated in Hitler, let him hold the book up against its temporal background. In a world that gauges the importance of events by the size of their headlines, the Great Detective ponders over the burnt match, the lost bootlace, the tiny and apparently negligible thing that may have power to hang a man. In a world in which popular education consists of biting off more ideas than can be chewed, the detective story remains the one form of fiction that absolutely defies the professional "digester"; it can



EDMUND WILSON
He found himself skipping

be read or it can be left unread, but it cannot be read about. Again, there is need in these days of industrial specialisation for books that take the layman through the mysteries and jargons of other men's trades and professions. A whole large subdivision of detective fiction serves that social purpose. If the man in the street knows anything of the intricacies of advertising, bookselling, campanology and a hundred other walks of life, it is because Death too has walked their mazes, with sharp-eyed investigators on his heels. To the social historian such books will have fifty times the documentary value of the crude fifteenth-century Dances of Death.

On the Other Hand . . .

Comment of that kind Mr. Wilson calls plain bunk. Here is his account of a recent experience:

"Yes. I think we have succeeded there. But I agree that kiddies' sessions, if they're going to be done, must be extremely well done. We have specialist adults in charge who are really skilled in the job. They get the children doing things—away from the microphone of course—and hold exhibitions to show what they've made, and so on."

"And the future?"

"Well, we're looking ahead. We'll be sending our acting general manager to London next year, and soon we shall be having a permanent office there, to exchange programmes with the BBC and handle New York for us, and also to watch for talent. We're hoping to get some really good speakers to come out for us. Another project for the future is—if we can get the paper—to start a monthly journal in addition to the *Weekly*. There's a lot of good material which, though it is not the type of thing for the *Weekly*, ought to be seeing the light of day. It'll be a serious monthly. But that's still just a proposal."

Children's Sessions

"Have you developed what you regard as satisfactory children's sessions?"

Three months ago I wrote an article on some recent detective stories. I had not read any fiction of this kind since the days of Sherlock Holmes, and since I constantly heard animated discussions of the merits of the mystery writers, I was curious to see what it was like today. The specimens I read I found disappointing, and I made some rather derogatory remarks on my impression of the genre in general. To my surprise, this brought me letters of protest in a volume and of a passionate earnestness which had hardly been elicited even by my occasional criticisms of the Soviet Union. Of the thirty-nine letters that have reached me, only seven approve my strictures. The writers of almost all the others seem deeply offended and shocked, and they all say almost exactly the same thing: that I had simply not read the right novels and that I would surely have a different opinion if I would only try this or that author recommended by the correspondent.

Overwhelmed by so much insistence, I at last wrote my correspondents that I would try to correct any injustice by undertaking to read some of the authors



DOROTHY SAYERS
"Does not write very well"

that had received the most recommendations and taking the whole matter up again. The preferences of these readers, however, when I had a tabulation of them made, turned out to be extremely divergent. They ranged over fifty-two writers and sixty-seven books, most of which got only one or two votes each. The only writers who got as many as five or over were Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Michael Innes, Raymond Chandler, and the author who writes under the names of Carter Dickson and John Dickson Carr.

It Didn't Ring the Bell

The writer that my correspondents were most nearly unanimous in putting at the top was Miss Dorothy L. Sayers, who was pressed upon me by eighteen people, and the book of hers that eight of them were sure I could not fail to enjoy was a story called "The Nine Tailors." Well, I set out to read "The

Nine Tailors" in the hope of tasting some novel excitement, and I must confess that it seems to me one of the duller books I have ever encountered in any field. The first part of it is all about bell-ringing as it is practised in English churches and contains a lot of information of the kind that you might expect to find in an encyclopedia article on campanology. I skipped a good deal of this, and found myself skipping, also, a large section of the conversations between conventional English village characters: "Oh, here's Hinkins with the aspidistras. People may say what they like about aspidistras, but they do go on all the year round and make a background," etc. There was also a dreadful conventional English nobleman of the casual and debonair kind, with the embarrassing name of Lord Peter Wimsey, and, though he was the focal character in the novel, being Miss Dorothy Sayers' version of the inevitable Sherlock Holmes detective, I had to skip a good deal of him too. In the meantime, I was losing the story, which had not got a firm grip on my attention, but I went back and picked it up and steadfastly pushed through to the end, and there I discovered that the whole point was that if a man was shut up in a belfry while a heavy peal of chimes was being rung, the vibrations of the bells might kill him. Not a bad idea for a murder, and Conan Doyle would have known how to dramatise it in an entertaining tale of thirty pages, but Miss Sayers had not hesitated to pad it out to a book of three hundred and thirty, contriving one of those stock cock-and-bull stories about a woman who commits bigamy without knowing it and larding the whole thing with details of church architecture, bits of quaint lore from books about bell-ringing, and the awful whimsical patter of Lord Peter.

Sub-Literary

I had often heard people say that Dorothy Sayers wrote well, and I felt that my correspondents had been playing her as their literary ace. But, really, she does not write very well: it is simply that she is more consciously literary than most of the other detective-story writers and that she thus attracts attention in a field which is mostly on a sub-literary level. In any serious department of fiction, her writing would

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NGAIO MARSH
"Unappetising sawdust"