

SHE TOOK TO CRIME FOR A JOKE

Ngaio Marsh Talks To Us About Detective Stories

NGAIO MARSH was born in Christchurch. She went to school in Christchurch. She was educated in Christchurch. She went to School of Art in Christchurch. In London she and a friend started a house decorating business. It is still going strong, but Miss Marsh had to leave to return to New Zealand. By the time she went back to England she was writing books and had neither the time nor the need to go decorating.

She has lately been in Wellington, discussing work with the NBS. The immediate result will be travel talks. Other talks, on detection and detective writers, will follow.

The detective story is her medium at present. She had previously been interested in journalism, and before her first return to New Zealand had "for a joke," written a mystery novel. At a day's notice she found she had to leave London. Almost on the way to the train she "dumped the manuscript" with an agent and heard later, much to her astonishment, that it had been published. New Zealand's Ngaio Marsh was entering the select circle of expert women detective story-writers: the circle of Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie; women whose books men read for mental exercise.

Back to Elizabeth

Strangely enough, detective stories are not her personal literary meat. For her reading she goes back to Elizabethan days. While she talked for *The Listener* she had by her some of the morality interludes of Heywood, who was concerned with debate and narrative, but never with plot and action.

Some day Miss Marsh hopes to write a serious novel. At present, she has no clear idea of it in her mind. She is not sure that it will have a New Zealand background, but is not sure that

Ngaio Marsh has prepared an attractive series of travel talks for broadcast shortly, and will also give talks on detection and detective writers, including an amusing description of a meeting of authors in a detection club in England

it should be centred anywhere else. She likes writing about the stage (for two years in New Zealand she toured with Alan Wilkie and an English comedy company), so it may be a story of strolling players in the days when players strolled.

Her major literary output at present is the plot and counter-plot, clue,

mystery and solution, dialogue and characterisation of the close-knit detective story.

Detection is Difficult

She finds it a fascinating medium; but an exacting medium. She points out that these days the detective story, as distinct from the thriller, met the demands of a very large number of keen minded men (and women) in all professions. Many of them were experts in their own way at criminology, law, police methods, as amateurs or professionals. The author of a good detective story had to write bearing in mind that her work would come under the close scrutiny of people who knew as much as, or more than, she did.

She had to refer constantly to legal authorities, to criminological text books. And over and above all this she had to come up to the remarkably high standard of characterisation and literary style in the modern detective novel.

Some were content with the neat pattern of developing events. They kept their characters, as she described it, "two-dimensional." One of these was Agatha Christie. Others rounded off the whole picture as a "three-dimensional" affair of plot, action, and lively characters. One of these was Dorothy Sayers. Margery Allingham's work she admired very much. And Conan Doyle, she thought, would sooner or later come back to popularity. His plunge into spiritualism and metaphysics had affected his market, but the real merit of his



NGAIO MARSH
Crime pays her well

work earned him recognition as a master of the craft.

She Takes a Risk

Admitting that she took a risk in saying so, Miss Marsh maintained that the great New Zealand novel had not been written. There had been many good ones, but the masterpiece had not appeared. It was natural, she said, that in a young country literature should still be confused and too self-conscious to be great. She doubted if the Dominion had yet developed the distinctive characteristics that would inspire a distinctive literary work. Katherine Mansfield had perhaps come closest to capturing the spirit of the country, but she had done it in the short story.

As far as she could see, the one outstanding characteristic of New Zealand after 100 years was the fact that they were acutely conscious, or acted as if they were acutely conscious, of how short those 100 years really had been. It was the same in Australia, in every young country: the people must always be asking visitors "what do you think about us?"

"Intelligentsia" here were very much aware of belonging to a minority group. In England, the mark of mental liveliness was evident everywhere and, most important, was accepted everywhere as something entirely natural and expected.

The transition stage was evident here. There was no criticism or condemnation implied in the theories she had stated. Now we were adolescent. Soon we should be adult.

The Herd Instinct

The talk went round to European nationalities. Not long ago Miss Marsh toured the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy, France. The German countryside, she said, was lovely. The German people she met in the small villages were kind and homely. But she remarked their love of being organised and regimented. It was the same, she believed, in Russia. In France and England people seemed to have the art of enduring or enjoying solitude. Those others were gregarious people, and she would not be surprised if the modern move to flock round "isms" was a move arising out of people's gregarious love of living in closely organised contact with a lot of other people.

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and

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