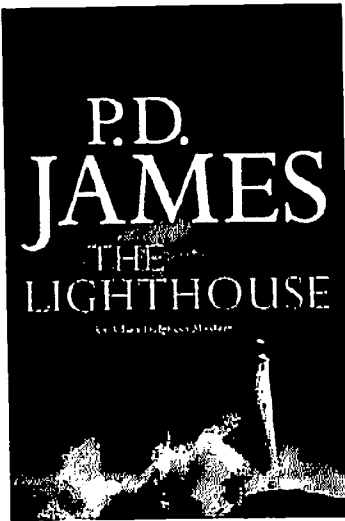


**P. D. JAMES' *THE LIGHTHOUSE*: A
RECONSTITUTION OF ENGLISH CLASSIC
MYSTERY INGREDIENTS**



THE LIGHTHOUSE

by P.D. James

London: Faber,

2005, 400 pp.

ISBN: 0-307-26291-X

Reviewed by Jacob George C¹.

The mainstream literary establishment has always shown a great reluctance to treat crime writing and other related genres as “real” literature. One of the great values of the detective story, according to Phyllis Dorothy James, is that it gives “an extraordinary realistic picture of what life was like at the time it was written much more so than many serious novels” (Snowden

¹ **Dr. Jacob George C.**, is a lecturer of the Department of English, Union Christian College, Alwaye, Kerala, India. He is currently working in Nizwa College of Technology, Sultanate of Oman.

1978:37). In accounting for the continued popularity of Dorothy L. Sayers's mysteries, James notes how clearly they reflect their period. "Perhaps because clue-making so often involves the routine and minutiae of ordinary life, the detective novel can tell us more about contemporary society than many a more pretentious literary form" (Foreword ix) What she means, of course, goes beyond the mere learning of details of the theatre from Ngaio Marsh or horse racing from Dick Francis or banking from Emma Lathen or orchids from Rex Stout. It is also learning about the mores and manners of Southern California from Ross MacDonald, the racial antagonisms and tensions in South Africa from James McClure, and insights into life among the ill and dying from P. D. James.

In mystery fiction, moreover, one can find the imposition of a moral order that is too often missing from contemporary society. Even though one may feel "impotent in the face of violence and tragedy and injustice in this world," the pattern at the end of the mystery novel does make things come out right (Bakerman 1977:55). The order that James found in the world of Jane Austen is the order the detective restores to a world whose equilibrium has been disrupted by murder. Detective fiction promises readers that the virtues of reason, sanity, and logic will triumph in the end and that evil is only a temporary lapse. Those who strongly believe that order can come out of chaos—that there is such a thing as justice—can find reassurance in detective fiction.

People who believe in society's basic and unambiguous values—that murder is wrong no matter who the victim, that even the most wretched of human beings has the right to live out his or her natural days—are affronted by murder. Since the victim cannot avenge himself, all the resources of civilized society must be brought to bear when murder is committed (Heffner 1980:13). Society in the person of the detective upholds these values by solving the crime and bringing the murderer to justice. Detective fiction, as James has said on more than one occasion, has all the fascination of a medieval morality play

The kind of detective story James writes belongs to the genre of the classical detective novel, the formal puzzle, the traditional English mystery that we associate with the golden age of detective fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. Barzun has succinctly isolated the elements of the formal traditional detective novel: He says:

The central mysterious death; the closed circle of suspects, each with a credible motive; the arrival of the detective like the avenging deity of an old Morality play; the final solution which the reader himself can arrive at by logical deduction from clues presented to him with deceptive cunning but essential fairness (Foreword 1982:xiv).

These four elements certainly characterize the classic mystery—and certainly also *The Lighthouse* of P. D. James.

In most of her novels P. D. James isolates her group of victims and suspects by homing in on a particular profession, but in *The Lighthouse* she uses an even more classic mystery device: a murder on an isolated location with a closed community. Combe Island, the locale of *The Lighthouse*, lies 12 miles off the north coast of Cornwall. It was once a pirates' enclave, then a private estate, and was eventually taken over by an obscure charitable trust. Under the terms of the trust, the island is used as a retreat for distinguished men and women to get away from the rigours of their professional lives. One of the guests on the island and a key character is Nathan Oliver, a novelist considered worthy of the Nobel Prize. As a native of the island, it is the rule of birth that allows Nathan Oliver his regular visits. Oliver's body is found hanging from the island's picturesque lighthouse. The island is impregnable, so only one of fifteen people on the island could have murdered Oliver—the other guests on the island, the full-time residents and the staff. Virtually everybody on Combe had a motive to kill Oliver, who was cold, self-absorbed and manipulative, a man who could only observe emotion and its effects upon others, but not engage in it himself. In the previous few days he had vented his fury on his daughter, Miranda, and her secret lover, Denys Tremlett, on the handyman, Dan Padgett and on another guest, Dr Mark Yelland, a vivisectionist in constant danger from animal rights activists who, to general consternation, has decided to exercise his right to live on Combe. Dr Mark Yelland had been the basis of a scurrilous portrait in the latest novel of Nathan.

As the late Lord Hardinge, who for decades was the most influential crime-fiction editor in Britain, once remarked, "Most crime writers feel the need to write an 'island book' sooner or later." The advantages of the closed community in *The Lighthouse* are obvious enough. First, there is the

fascination of watching characters in a closed society: “the power struggles, the attempt to establish and retain one’s own identity, the way in which people group defensive or offensive alliances, particularly against strangers or the alienated” (Bakerman 1977:56). It is this closed society that the detective penetrates, creating dramatic tension as he examines it with fresh eyes and as the society reacts to him. Second, murder in a closed community touches everyone. It forces each person to recognize the desperation or sense of extremity that can lead one to take someone else’s life and perhaps to recognize that no one is free from that desperation or sense of extremity. Third, a closed society means a closed circle of suspects, each with an appropriate motive, means, and opportunity. There should not be too many, so as to be confusing, or too few, so as to rob the reader of the pleasure of solving the puzzle. With a limited cast, the author can build excitement and tension. Each character knows that the passenger seated next to him on the train or the office mate whose desk is across the aisle or the boarder who lives down the hall might be the killer. Finally, the closed community with its claustrophobic atmosphere is the ideal setting for brewing up a cauldron of desires and disappointments among people and for bringing to the surface emotions of envy, greed, jealousy, hatred, even love, often the most destructive force—all appropriate motives for murder. James’ is “A strongly hierarchical community with its own esoteric rules and conventions; a mysterious but fascinating world of men and women performing a great variety of necessary jobs... where the reader, like the patient, feels vulnerable, apprehensive and alien” (Barzun 1982:340). *The Lighthouse* is a psychological exploration of a small society, where strains, disappointments and moral ambiguity can build up in a group of people living in a closed community, and lead one human being to kill another for reasons that are not forgivable, though they may be understandable.

The action in *The Lighthouse* plays out pretty much as it has in 19 previous James’ novels: Commander Adam Dalgleish and his team—Inspector Kate Miskin and Sergeant Francis Benton-Smith—interview the finite group of suspects, making deductions along the way until the commander puts all the pieces together. Various readers of P. D. James’ novels have attempted to understand the character of her detective, Adam Dalgliesh, by discussing him in terms of classic detective fiction. Francis Wyndham, for example, writing in the *London Times Literary Supplement*, has placed Adam in the tradition of the gentleman detective as developed by Dorothy Sayers and

Ngaio Marsh. As such he is a suitably romantic sleuth, attracted to women, able to carry on stylish courtships of them, fond of music and good literature (Jane Austen is his favorite writer), sensitive and yet ruthless enough to be able to perform his sometimes distasteful duties. Norma Siebenheller, in her book on James, discusses Adam in terms of this same tradition. Like the earlier English mystery writers—Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham and others—James writes tightly constructed and civilized novels in which inventive characterizations, psychological insights and detailed descriptions replace violence, physical conflict and rough-and-tumble action. And yet, Siebenheller argues, James also departs from that tradition in significant ways. Rather than write books in which the puzzle is all important, as did Agatha Christie and to a lesser extent Sayers, Marsh and Allingham, in which an element of make-believe pervades throughout, James has chosen to portray a more realistic world, one peopled with characters whose actions are carefully motivated and whose reactions are true to their complex personalities.

It is in this tradition—that of realistic popular fiction, rather than that of classic detective fiction—that Siebenheller places both James and her detective Adam Dalgliesh. A far cry from the almost comical characters who served Christie and Sayers as sleuths, Adam is a real detective, a professional policeman who solves crimes using standard police procedures rather than sudden and capricious insights or revelations. In addition, Adam is a far more complex character than either Christie's or Sayers' protagonists—a man who, because of early emotional traumas, has built a protective wall around himself which no one can penetrate, a man whose most marked characteristic is his detachment, his fierce desire for privacy.

In an interview in *Armchair Detective*, James promised never to inflict upon her readers “the stereotyped English detective hero, a sprig of nobility, who is welcomed by professional police with gentle fun and subtle awe,” and who eventually unmasks the murderer (Bakerman 1977:57). She had in mind, of course, the amateur gentleman sleuth so beloved of the writers of the golden age of detective fiction, a sleuth like Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey: “Independent, eccentric, brilliant, omniscient, in egregious contrast to the poorly paid, plodding, unimaginative and deferential police” (Bakerman 1977:56). In her opinion, the day of the amateur sleuth, if not over, had at least reached and passed the “high noon” of his popularity. The

amateur gentleman (or lady) sleuth reigned supreme in the 1920s and 1930s. Even when their vocation was detecting, few seemed to earn a living from it, thus not endangering their amateur status. In addition to Lord Peter there were Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, Margery Allingham's Albert Campion, rumored to be related to the royal family, and in the United States, Ellery Queen and S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance. To be sure, there were a few police heroes in the 1920s and 1930s: Earl Derr Biggers's Charlie Chan and Freeman Wills Crofts's Inspector French, but certainly the most popular detectives were the amateurs.

Today, however, mystery writers settle on the professional policeman as detective since it is more realistic. It is only infrequently that someone who is not a policeman runs across a corpse in a closed community. More and more, mysteries are "rooted in the realities of human existence." More and more, they deal "perceptively with such universal absolutes as life and death, love and hate, treachery and failure." More and more, detection "is closer to the realities, the ardors, the frustrations and the disappointments of real-life criminal investigation" (Bakerman 1977:58).

A policeman hero, moreover, is likely to be free of the eccentricities of manner and being that characterize the great sleuths of yesteryear, eccentricities that can and did become tiresome; Philo Vance's erudite knowledge and Regie cigarettes; Ellery Queen's immense ego and his rimless pince-nez; Hercule Poirot's little gray cells and his passion for symmetry and sweets. Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ellery Queen all changed some of the more pronounced and irritating characteristics of their detectives as the years went by. Lord Peter Wimsey, Albert Campion, and Ellery Queen metamorphosed from fatuous, foppish sleuths to more socially concerned, caring men one could turn to in times of need or trouble.

James did not want that kind of behavior from her detective. Her detective would be neither omniscient nor omnipotent. James demanded intelligence, experience, sensitivity, and above all, the professionalism that goes with painstaking police work. In these attributes Adam Dalgliesh, her detective, resembles many of his fictional police contemporaries: Patricia Moyes's conscientious Chief Superintendent Henry Tibbet; Ruth Rendell's very moral Chief Inspector Reginald Wexford; Michael Innes's erudite and urbane Sir John Appleby, now retired; Ngaio Marsh's gentlemanly Detective

Superintendent Roderick Alleyn—like Dalgliesh, a skilled interrogator of suspects; and Josephine Tey’s sophisticated and sensitive Inspector Alan Grant.

James sees the imperturbable Dalgliesh as a “very detached man... a very lonely man in a lonely profession, one which brings him into contact with tragedy, with evil” (Bakerman 1977:57). He is not unlike a novelist. The novelist stands outside and observes his or her own experiences. Even at moments of tragedy the writer “is able... to be watching it—to be suffering, even” (Bakerman 1977:58). Like the novelist who is both in society and yet also detached and watching, Dalgliesh as he investigates feels all the pain and suffering of the human condition. Dalgliesh is a man who tracks down murderers. He is also a published poet. He is far more interesting and complex than Lord Peter Wimsey or Albert Campion. Nonetheless, he is their successor in his ability to solve baffling crimes through logical deductions from observed data. By giving him a potentially fatal illness (SARS), James allows Dalgliesh to see that turning away from the world is itself like dying. And at the end of the novel, he has made the life-changing decision (marriage) he has been shying away from for years. When it comes down to it, though, Dalgliesh, like his creator, effortlessly outclasses his younger rivals. For all the daring of Benton’s climb and Miskin’s equally courageous exploits, the main action takes place silently, inside the head of our half-delirious invalid hero. Dalgliesh solves the problem, and the penetrating intelligence with which he does so is as exhilarating to read about as any life-or-limb-threatening piece of physical action. For all the agreeably nervous-making gothic scenery, the swirling mists and sinister minor characters, the greatest pleasure James offers us is the spectacle, one seldom presented in fiction, of two fine minds working: one is Dalgliesh’s, the other is her own.

As Barzun convincingly argues, “The point of a detective story is the unravelling of a physical mystery in a physical way by plausible inference” (1982:5). But for James it is not the puzzle that is of primary interest. Few readers, she suspects, “watch for every clue.” Most “guess the murderer more through... knowledge of the author, his style, prejudices and foibles, than through close attention to each detail of the plot.” She believes that readers pit their wits “against the writer, not his villain or his detective.” Nevertheless, she is scrupulously careful in giving all the clues—and giving them fairly, she hopes. “It should be possible to reason out the solution.”

After all, readers of mysteries “have a right to expect that it’ll be fair.” At the same time, she believes strongly that the solution has to be psychologically right: It is “no good if it merely fits neatly because these are the facts.... Psychologically, the crime must arise from human nature” (Bakerman 1977:55). On the 305th page of *The Lighthouse*, the requisite thunderbolt strikes Commander Adam Dalglish: “And suddenly, with no sense of revelation and no exultation but with absolute certainty, he saw the answer to the puzzle. It was as if the wooden pieces of a spherical puzzle were whirling wildly about his head and then, piece by piece, clicking together into a perfect globe. The truth came to him in snatches of conversation, the voices as clear as if they were being spoken into his ear.” This traditional eureka moment is something to gladden hearts — at least among aficionados of the formally perfect murder scheme. *The Lighthouse* will gratify that readership with what the author herself calls “copybook killings: a small closed society, no access from outside, a limited number of suspects” (Bakerman 1977:56).

The Lighthouse is too rooted in genre conventions to count originality as its strong suit. James uses the familiar framework to build a complicated structure of arguments and insights. She has said that the rigid form of a traditional “golden age” detective novel, like the 14 lines and strict rhyming sequence of a sonnet, sets the writer’s imagination free. But she is careful to play fair with the reader, which is a requirement of traditional crime fiction, and, although *The Lighthouse* is shorter and tauter than some of James’s more discursive “middle period” novels, it still goes into meticulous detail about each character’s past.

Yet it might be said that James has written one of her most moving novels. As she has done throughout her career, she sticks closely to formula in the shape of her mystery story but injects her characters with a range of emotions and subtlety of motive that lifts the proceedings well beyond the level of a puzzle and its solution. James’s gifts for the evocation of landscape, for the conjuring of atmosphere, for the precise analysis of her imagined characters have always ensured that her novels had levels of interest way beyond what their plots required, but here the sense that there is more to the getting of wisdom than case solving is not only implied but acknowledged.

Most of the best crime fiction derives its charge from the paradoxical

tension between consoling form and menacing mood; the form suggests that every crime has a punishment, every mystery a solution and every story an ending. The mood, in the hands of the best authors (and James is one of the best, not only in this genre, but in all current British fiction-writing), persistently subverts that optimism. *The Lighthouse* presents a world in which pain is far too pervasive to be eradicated by a single arrest. James's sensibility transforms the squalor and pettiness of crime into the grandeur of desolation. James has been signaling for decades that Webster, the great voluptuary of death, is one of her literary touchstones, and she quotes him again here, along with Auden's warning, "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakerman, J.S. "Interview". In *Armchair Detective*, 10 January 1977:53-59.
- Barzun, J. B. "The Heart-Pounding Pleasure of Whodunits". In *Family Weekly*, 22 August 1982:5-9.
- Brabazon, J. *Dorothy L. Sayers*. New York: ABC, 1981.
- Heffner, C. "Tea and Perdify: P. D. James and the Gentle 'Art of Murder'". In *Washington Post*, 30 April 1980:13-14.
- Snowdon, A. "Interview." In *Toronto Globe & Mail*, 2 December 1978:34-38.
- Winn, D. "A Fictional Prognosis". In *Murder Ink*, New York: Zark, 1977.