

DOROTHY L. SAYERS ESSAY PUBLISHED IN:
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Sally Wright
on
The Nine Tailors by Dorothy L. Sayers
(1934)

I was a weird kid. I liked Shakespeare and Suetonius, because they were read to me, but I never understood what a cootie was. And kids thought I was peculiar.

I took-up residence in fantasy-land (with Dickens, with Merlin, with *Rebecca's* replacement, with *The Man In The Iron Mask*) pecking-out tacky stories. Then I got to high school, and Dorothy L. Sayers made me want to write mysteries.

She created a character who grew into a person in her own lushly detailed world in 1920s England. She told crafted tales with innovative style in a feisty, descriptive, amused voice. For, unlike her contemporaries', most of Sayer's mysteries are real novels of character and manners that live and breathe on their own.

Lord Peter Wimsey's is the soul inside the stories - his gentlemanly self-mockery, his regard for all sorts, his breadth of knowledge and ability, his single-minded search for truth no matter who it hurts. He's a man of parts who detests pretension; an aristocrat of substance inside a "whimsical" slipcover. For Sayers' concerns are moral: guilt, justice, personal responsibility, the value of work well done.

Wimsey lives in an age of war-wounded without work, of Bolshevik clubs and vapid flappers, of women fighting for jobs and education - all caught in the never-ending struggle between what's good and what's evil. Sayers reveals that social setting with compassion *and* acerbic wit, sprinkled with scholarly snobbery. Peter actually proposes (and Harriet Vane accepts) in untranslated Latin - after three books chronicling their courtship! Which still rankles today. But I do like the learning in Sayers' books; campanology in *The Nine Tailors* - the bells, the ringers, the terminology, which Sayers studied exhaustively. She already knew the social context (the clerical circle of a small village parish in the flat, dyke-crossed Fens), since her father had been Rector of just such a village. Sayers makes the country, the people, the action real in a remarkable degree for her time (the Rector and his wife in particular). Though when Wimsey applies the pattern of a "peal" to decrypt a critical clue, Sayers, being a woman of excess (gastronomical *and* literary), presents *every* detail.

Even so, she opened a door for the rest of us by describing work in depth, and plenty have walked through (Dick Francis among them). It was that,

and her “novel of manners as mystery” that changed the genre forever - and helped make me a novelist writing the Ben Reese books.

Like Wimsey, Ben knows what war’s like. He was a scout in WWII who became a college archivist restoring books and paintings. He was born poor on a Michigan farm, but he suffers from a form of limitless curiosity that’s not unlike Wimsey’s. Their personalities are totally different, but they both hate cruelty *and* hypocrisy. And expect a lot of themselves.

Reese gives me challenges and satisfactions much as Wimsey must’ve given Sayers: immersion in an interesting male mind in depth from book to book; a reason to learn new undertakings while shaking my head at human nature; a chance to examine death and sorrow, as well as justice and mercy.

C.S. Lewis said Dorothy L. Sayers, “... aspired to be, and was, at once a popular entertainer and a conscientious craftsman: like (in her degree) Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Moliere. I have an idea that, with a very few exceptions, it is only such writers who matter much in the long run.”

Even her detractors say Sayers was brilliant, with her plays, her Christian apologetics, her translation of Dante.

But I, for one, still find myself wishing she’d written more Peter Wimseys.

Sally Wright is an Edgar Allan Poe Award Finalist who lives with a scientist husband, a one-eyed horse, a half-wild cat and a boxer dog on the farmland in Ohio where they raised their two kids.

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