

"Academic Mysteries 101."
Mystery Reader's Journal
by
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PARADOX AND PRINCIPLE
Sally Wright's Ben Reese Series

Publish and Perish (Multnomah, 1997; Fawcett, 1999), **Pride and Predator** (Multnomah; Ballantine, 1999); **Pursuit and Persuasion** (Multnomah; Fawcett, 2000), **Out of the Ruins** (Multnomah; Fawcett, 2004)

Paradoxes and contrasts inform Sally Wright's mystery series with themes of light and dark, moral clarity and moral decay, sacrificial love and pathological hatred. Some of these paradoxes are embodied in her protagonist Ben Reese, "a man of intellect and a man of action"—an archivist at Alderton, a small private college in Hillsdale, Ohio, in the 1960s. Only a few people know that Ben was a scout doing dangerous, secret work behind enemy lines during World War II. Ben himself strives to keep his passions in check, knowing that his commitment to justice could take a darker turn toward revenge if he does not keep watch over his own heart and soul.

Although Ben's vocation is in academia, the novels inhabit much larger territory—"Human nature being what it is." They explore human pride, greed, selfish ambition, jealousy, and strife—as well as the presence of faith and grace under extreme pressure, from within as well as from without.

A character in *Pursuit and Persuasion*, the third novel in the series, evaluates the murder victim as "... one of the most intelligent people I've ever met. Though that hardly means one isn't a fool. As I'm sure you know, as an academic."

Fools abound in academia, as Wright skillfully shows. However, the murder victim is no fool—none of Wright's victims are—and we never hear the author whispering between the lines, "This person deserves to be murdered." Instead, she shows the victims' inner lives and relationships with others, investing them with dignity, faith, and grace. Wright's victims have the capacity for self-examination and a willingness to acknowledge their faults. "They" could be any one of us, with our own human faults and imperfections—a person who simply stands between the murderer and what he or she wants.

In all four books, the deaths appear natural, which means the authorities don't investigate. It falls to Ben to re-examine these deaths, usually at the request of someone who loved the victim. Ben isn't satisfied with the obvious answers, and uses all his intellectual and physical skills to expose the murderer and bring justice.

In *Publish & Perish*, the first book of the series, the ideals of academia are marred by ambition and envy. Ben's friend Richard West, chairman of the English Department at

Alderton, receives a mysterious book in the mail and reacts to it “as though it were alive and dangerous and able to corrupt the flesh it touched.” Soon afterward, Richard dies of an apparent heart attack. Ben’s investigation turns up several suspects, including a professor whose tenure Richard plans to deny because he “... would abandon all the great writers of western civilization in order to concentrate on Burroughs, Ferlinghetti, and Kerouac”, and an embittered former student. “People don’t expect you to lie,” says a faculty member, “except in an official capacity, and then it’s called alumni relations.”

Ben the hunter, “like a predator with prey, coiled but patient and single-minded,” becomes the hunted in *Pride and Predator*, set mostly in Scotland. Ben visits his friend Lord Alex Chisholm, the owner of Balnagard Castle, to evaluate the collections Lord Chisholm inherited with the estate. Ben arrives the day after the death of Jon MacLean, a minister and friend of Alex and Lady Jane Chisholm. Though Jon died from bee stings, Lord Alex asks Ben to investigate why Jon was carrying a picnic hamper that didn’t belong to him, and how the bees got inside the hamper. Was it the doing of a mentally disturbed man who blamed Jon for the death of his brother? Or a self-righteous church member whom Jon had confronted about his adultery? The killer targets Ben, and others. This book, in particular, upends a convention of the mystery genre in order to show the pain and tragedy of murder.

In *Pursuit and Persuasion* (a finalist for the 2001 MWA Edgar Allan Poe Award), Ben’s apprentice, Ellen Winter, asks him to investigate the death of Ellen’s aunt, Georgina Fletcher. Georgina’s poems provide clues to the characters who might have had cause to murder her. Ben’s pursuit of an obsessed killer very nearly costs him his life, with a climactic scene set amid a trove of old books.

Out of the Ruins (Book 4) features Hannah Hill, paralyzed and bedridden from MS, at the center of a benign web of “silken threads... tied to a collection of delicate and damaged souls.” Hannah loves, prays for, and helps all those who care for her—despite being rejected by her own daughter. The tragedy of broken family relationships is explored, along with the possibility of forming loving connections that are closer than birth ties. When Hannah dies, Ben gets involved at the request of his aunt Amelia, Hannah’s childhood friend. Wright examines issues such as eminent domain and euthanasia, and why old debts are often repaid in blood.

Wright’s strong sense of place yields vivid descriptions: “...mourners huddling under the dripping cedars with their umbrellas nearly touching, like a battalion of black-backed turtles tucked in against the rain.” Literary references abound, from Jane Austen to Samuel Johnson. Wright’s secondary characters are crafted with descriptions worthy of Dickens. We learn about practices such as falconry, bee-keeping, book collecting, and microbiology, and that Magdalen (College, in Oxford) is pronounced “maudlin.”

Ben’s wife, Jessie, died four years before the series opens. Ben’s tragic past colors his present relationships with two women, Kate Lindsay and Ellen Winter. Wright promises to resolve Ben’s romantic dilemmas in subsequent books.

At funerals, we honor the life of the deceased to help us understand the significance of that person’s death. So it is in Wright’s work. The series rewards the thoughtful reader by exploring meaningful themes and issues with passion, intelligence, and faith.