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Detective Fiction.* Nancy-Lou Patterson. Ed. Emily E.  
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**Additional Keywords**

Wimsey

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**DETECTING WIMSEY: PAPERS ON DOROTHY L. SAYERS'S DETECTIVE FICTION.** Nancy-Lou Patterson. Ed. Emily E. Auger and Janet Brennan Croft. Valleyhome Books, 2017. xiv + 279 pp. 978-1-987919-11-0 (hardcover; paperback and e-pub also available). Amazon.com has the paperback at \$28.67.

NANCY-LOU PATTERSON WAS A MULTI-TALENTED PERSON, both an artist and a teacher of art, a creative writer, and an appreciative essayist on writings by (especially) C.S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers. In this book, in addition to the essays to be discussed below, several line drawings are reproduced: three for Sayers's centenary, pp. i, 183, and 279 (and the first and the third also appear, in part, on the front and the back covers respectively); two accompanying Patterson's essay "'All Nerves and Nose': Lord Peter Wimsey as Wounded Healer in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers," p. 1 (the two drawings titled "Shamamic Descents of Lord Peter Wimsey" and "Shamanic Ascents of Lord Peter Wimsey"); another two accompanying "'A Comedy of Masks': Lord Peter as Harlequin in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Murder Must Advertise*," p. 70 (the two drawings titled "Harlequin's Dive" and "Harlequin in the Tree"); and five accompanying "'Beneath That Ancient Roof': The House as Symbol in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Busman's Honeymoon*," p. 98 (the five drawings titled "Talboys," "Bedroom Casement," "Chimney," "Kitchen," and "Door and Drain"). Although it would have taken an editorial paragraph for explanation, it seems a pity that Patterson's one illustration for a fictional radio address written by Sayers, as if spoken by Lord Peter Wimsey, was not included; it shows Peter Wimsey, as a boy, in 221b Baker Street, talking to Holmes and Watson. (This appears on the cover of *Sayers on Holmes: Essays and Fiction on Sherlock Holmes*, a 2001 publication of the Mythopoeic Press, now alas out of print. —Ed.)

But the essays are the main appeal of this book. The editors have arranged them into two large sections, of eight and five essays respectively, in

the listing on the contents page. The first section is arranged in time sequence with the publication dates of the Lord Peter novels—although the first of the eight is a partial exception. In that essay, “All Nerves and Nose” (full title above), Patterson considers Lord Peter’s burial during a bombardment in World War I and his being dug out in time to save his life to create the titular “wound” of the “Wounded Healer.” This war episode and its emotional effect (today called post-traumatic stress disorder) is introduced in the eighth chapter of the first novel, which Patterson considers a note of realism in a book mainly conceived in the tone of farce. The original digging out is a symbolic resurrection, of course, but although Patterson mentions the possibility of that interpretation (4), she instead treats the pattern in terms of shamanism. For example, she says there “is a sexual element in [the] downward way, a ‘sacred marriage with the untamed spirit of the opposite sex’” (she is quoting from Joan Halifax’s *Shaman: The Wounded Healer* [1981]). Patterson goes on, “This marriage sequence begins for Lord Peter with the moment when he conceives an instant attraction for a girl who is accused of murder” (4) in *Strong Poison*. And she surveys all the other Wimsey novels in shamanistic terms, although not wholly in publication order. Probably most readers will find the shamanism to be a difficult term to pin down—it includes shape-changing as in Wimsey’s three roles in *Murder Must Advertise*—but the basic idea of Wimsey taking up detection as a compensation for his war-caused nervous problems works well. This is tied to his dislike of being in authority (presumably from ordering men into often losing battles in World War I).

Patterson’s second essay is on *Strong Poison* (1930), the fifth of the Lord Peter novels. The analysis has various sections, showing how different motifs in the novel are developed. The section on the poisoned omelet is titled “The Structural Transformation of the Egg.” The first non-literal use of *egg* appears in Lord Peter’s exclamation over one juror refusing to agree that Harriet Vane is guilty of poisoning her lover, “‘Good egg,’ said Wimsey[.] ‘Oh, excellent, excellent egg!’” (qtd. 16). Other metaphors involving eggs are introduced from the text of the novel. Patterson sums up, “The egg is a profoundly resonant and ambivalent symbol in human culture and lends itself very well to images of change and counter-change” (21). This reviewer, while admitting an egg could well be a symbol of several things, would call this particular use of “egg” a motif, as in music, not a symbol. But, whichever it is, the use suggests part of Patterson’s treatment of the reinforcing details of this novel.

Next is “‘Bloody Farce’: Irony, Farce, and Mortality in Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Have His Carcase*.” Here Patterson tackles what is often considered the poorest of Sayers’s mysteries. Patterson goes through the book chapter by chapter, commenting on their tones as well as other aspects. Her reading of the novel as a deliberate ironic farce, while not always convincing, does allow for

more tonal unity than is usually found in this book. Actually, this reviewer is not convinced by Northrop Frye's definition of farce in his treatment of genres in *Anatomy of Criticism*, which is Patterson's touchstone in her discussion. But Patterson makes more tonal sense out of the book than most critics have.

These three chapters will have to stand for a lengthy survey of the other chapters in the first section of essays in the book. The other novels covered in individual essays in this section are *Murder Must Advertise* (the illustrations of Lord Peter as a Harlequin have been mentioned), *The Nine Tailors* (Patterson does a version of the 'Goddunnit' reading—at least two other essayists have given variations on the same thing), and *Busman's Honeymoon*, the last Wimsey novel (the pictures of aspects of the house have been mentioned). Also in this section is an essay titled "'Eve's Sharp Apple': Five Transgressing Women in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers." Patterson considers five women in Sayers's novels—specifically, in *Unnatural Death*, *The Documents in the Case*, *Five Red Herrings*, and *Busman's Honeymoon*. This is the first of two appearances of the non-Wimsey *Documents* in these surveys. The final essay in this first section is "'The Perilous Synthesis': Sacred and Profane Love in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Thrones, Dominations*." This is Patterson's reading of the manuscript fragments Sayers left of her last planned Wimsey novel; knowledge of Jill Paton Walsh's completion of the book (published in 1995) will not necessarily help a reader with Patterson's reconstruction because Walsh had in addition a later typescript, which, while still a fragment, was in some details different from the manuscript.

The second section on the contents page lists five essays. Two of them, at least in part, discuss the mystery novels. "'A Bloomsbury Blue-Stocking': Dorothy L. Sayers's Bloomsbury Years in Their Spatial and Temporal Context" traces the references by Sayers to the London area known as Bloomsbury, famous in literary studies for Virginia Woolf and the rest of the liberated Bloomsbury Group. Sayers lived there when she began her career as a mystery novelist, when she worked for an advertising agency, when she had her illegitimate son (although his birth and his rearing were elsewhere), and when she got married. Patterson finds a reference to Bloomsbury (often more than one) in each novel but one and in several of the Wimsey short stories—she notes that often the murderer lives in Bloomsbury. The other essay discussing the novels, obviously from the title, is "Images of Judaism and Anti-Semitism in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers." Patterson discusses uses of stereotyping of Jews and dark-skinned persons in *Whose Body?*, *Strong Poison*, *Unnatural Death*, *Murder Must Advertise*, *Have His Carcase*, *Clouds of Witness*, a note in *The Man Born to Be King* (not a novel), and *Busman's Honeymoon*. Patterson concludes: "What is asked is a standard of self-examination beyond that used by Sayers in her treatment of Jews" (223).

The other three essays include a two-page survey of Sayers's writings for children: "Even the Parrot Knows Better Than to Eat the Peel: Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) Writes for Children." More substantial are "'Cat o' Mary': The Spirituality of Dorothy L. Sayers" and "Why We Honor the Centenary of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)." The latter is written as a defense of the inclusion of discussions of Sayers in the pages of *Mythlore*, not as the greater subject it might suggest. But it does have some interesting, brief comments on the way some of her plays are like the writings of the Inklings. Patterson could have done more with *The Just Vengeance* (1946), Sayers's Charles Williams-influenced play. (Janet Brennan Croft, one of the editors, has a better defense of Sayers's ties to the Inklings in an introduction, pp. ix-xi—still, unfortunately, without mention of *The Just Vengeance*.) The other essay in the book is "'Cat o' Mary': The Spirituality of Dorothy L. Sayers." It will interest many readers of *Mythlore*, but not all. Patterson begins from Sayers's fragment of an autobiographical fiction "Cat o' Mary," alluding to the Mary and Martha account in the New Testament, with Sayers identifying with Mary. But Patterson complicates it by pointing to Sayers's combining of Mary of Bethany, Mary Magdalen, and the anonymous woman "who was a Sinner" of Luke VII" (226) when she presents the character in *The Man Born to Be King*—thus Sayers has a more complicated view of herself (Patterson believes) than the fragment might at first suggest.

This is a good book, over all. Patterson's dependence on critical theory in some (not all) of the essays can lead her in odd but usually interesting directions. At least one trivial error on Patterson's part appears—C.S. Lewis's first book of poetry was published two months after he returned to Oxford after WWI, not after his graduation (232). A misprint says that "Dorothy L. Sayers's marriage to Oswald Atherton Fleming lasted until she died in 1950" (197). "She" should be "he"; Fleming died in 1950, Sayers in 1957. One of the editors, Auger, uses "anthology" when most writers would use "collection" (xii). After a "Bibliography" at the end by Auger of eighteen pages appears "A Supplemental List" by Croft of seven more pages. In Croft's list of the continuations of the Wimsey novels by Walsh (257), the third novel is omitted: *The Attenbury Emeralds* (2010). But it is a welcome thing to bring Patterson's understandings of Sayers's fiction into a handy collection. Patterson is far more often right (it seems to this reviewer) than wrong, and this will be a basic collection for full critical appreciation of Sayers's mysteries.

—Joe R. Christopher

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