



A Grave Mistake

Ngaio Marsh

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A spa stay turns into a homicidal holiday...

A bit snobbish and a trifle high-strung, Sybil Foster prides herself on owning the finest estate in Upper Quintern and hiring the best gardener. In fact, she is rapturous over the new asparagus beds when a visit from her unwelcome stepson sends her scurrying to a chic spa for a rest cure, a liaison with the spa's director...and an apparent suicide. Her autopsy holds one surprise, a secret drawer a second. And Inspector Roderick Alleyn, C.I.D., digging about Upper Quintern, may unearth still a third...deeply buried motive for murder.

A Grave Mistake Details

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Author : Ngaio Marsh

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From Reader Review A Grave Mistake for online ebook

Richard Thomas says

Twists and turns.

As with all her books, it rattles on at a good pace, it's easy to read and there are plenty of red herrings to delight and intrigue the reader. The book is worth reading but perhaps it is not one of her best but it is still well plotted and maintains interest. Sadly Troy Alleyn does not appear.

Kelly says

Super promising author. I can't conceal my excitement at the prospect of twenty well written mysteries, and I have no doubt I'll read all of Ms. Marsh's works but this one left me a touch bereft in the end. Without spoiling anything I'll say I figured out the who and the how but not the why. And when it came . . . eh? I don't know, I suppose there are worse motives for killing but it didn't feel terribly true to character. Oh well. Everything else - the period Britishness, the pacing, the humorous details - were all top drawer and I'm very excited to devour the rest.

JJ says

An enjoyable mystery with a fairly dated feel to it but you feel you must try this author if you've done Christie and Sayers and others of that ilk. Anyway, I'm a bit dated myself. Though written in 1978 I think it is set earlier. Alleyn, like Peter Wimsey is a gentleman detective.

You get to know some of the residents of the village of Upper Quintern where story takes place. A death occurs but this proves to be a false start.

When the 'proper' death happens there is already a surfeit of suspicious characters and you're not really sure why they deem the death worthy of investigation. However, the more Alleyn and sidekick Fox look into it, the more suspicious things begin to look.

As you get near the end the finger points inexorably at one of the villagers and a neat twist gives Alleyn the necessary proof for an arrest.

I was looking for a more thought provoking reason for murder but it turned out to be a bit ordinary.

There are lots of Alleyn books and though dated, language-wise, are interesting and wittily written. Alleyn makes for a very sympathetic policeman and I liked Verity and wished she could have articulated out loud more of what was in her head as she seemed clever and sensible. I'd happily read more of the Alleyn stories.

Lee Ann says

Very good – stands alone as a novel. It plays fair all the way through. It's a later work. Society has changed since she started writing and she's not really happy about it. Her books serve as a chronicle of Britain's changing society. She makes such vivid characters in such small sketches.

Sarah says

Three and a half stars.

A cosy village mystery first published in the late 1970's. The village is Upper Quintern and the residents are mostly wealthy with maids and gardeners shared between houses. A Greek multi-millionaire has recently bought one of the local mansions and village gossip ensues.

A sudden death occurs and Chief Superintendent Alleyn is called to the village with Inspector Fox in support. They investigate a full cast of lively and likely suspects as they try to restore order to the village.

Marsh writes with wit, charm and atmosphere. At times the writing felt dated and the plot was perhaps lacking in complexity, but I accepted that and it did become an engrossing read.

Scuzzymonster says

Ngaio Marsh is brilliant for when you are too tired or busy to concentrate on anything more high brow, just like Agatha Christie. I personally prefer the earlier ones from the 1930s and during the war, and the ones set in New Zealand rather than in the UK, but they are all good. I am unashamedly in love with the hero of all Marsh's books, Inspector Alleyn, but again I do prefer him when he's younger in the earlier books. Grave Mistake is fine, but it's from the 70s and frankly, all of the characters irritated me somewhat.

FangirlNation says

In Grave Mistake by Ngaio Marsh, former woman of the theater Verity Preston has lived in her original hometown of Upper Quintern and now uses the chance to write plays. Her childhood sometimes-friend, Sybil Foster, whose daughter Prunella is Verity's goddaughter, accompanies Verity to a private party at the estate of their new neighbor, the rich collector Nicolas Markos. There, Verity is alarmed to see a face from her past, now calling himself Dr. Basil Schramm, and Sybil is drawn at once to the highly magnetic man. Verity can't settle down to her writing before receiving news that Sybil's stepson from her late husband's first marriage, the "egregious Claude," is about to arrive from Australia. Thus, Sybil checks herself into Greengages, a spa rest home, to avoid having to face Claude.

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Teri-K says

[A clause in a will forcing someone to marry to inherit isn't valid and I seriously doubt it would have been valid in England at that time. Also, impersonating a doctor is illegal, so he should have been arrested or at least talked to much earlier and not been given the chance to escape. (hide spoiler)]

John says

A couple of days ago I was reading a critique of Marsh's novel *Last Ditch* (1977) that pulled the book apart on a whole bunch of grounds, with most of which I agreed: it's indeed pretty dire. But when the reviewer then said that all of Marsh's last few books were "atrocious" I had to demur. *Grave Mistake*, which I'd finished reading literally hours before coincidentally stumbling across the review in question, kept me thoroughly entertained from first page to last and yet was published the year after *Last Ditch*. In terms of pure puzzle, it doesn't rank especially highly, but in every other respect it's a very fine detective novel.

Verity Preston, a respectable spinster with a past that was wilder than people might now think, is our primary viewpoint character here; I've no idea if Verity is intended as a sort of Ngaio Marsh surrogate, but it certainly feels that way. She's not entirely a passive character, but she's settled in her existence as an observer rather than a mover and shaker. What she observes are the goings on in the village of Upper Quintern and its environs.

And what has just gone on is that Verity's oldest -- if not closest -- friend Sophie Foster has died while staying at a rest-cure hotel to recover from her latest bout of hypochondria. All the signs are that Sophie committed suicide, but everyone who knew her doubts this: not only was she not the type, she had every reason to live. Moreover, she recently made a bizarre will leaving most of her fortune to the doctor who'd been treating her at the hotel -- whom she'd known for only a matter of weeks but who happens to be the man with whom Verity, decades ago, committed most of her wildness.

Soon Roderick Alleyn, Marsh's series detective, is called in to investigate alongside his long-time sidekick Fox.

Mostly because Sophie was so heavingly rich, there are lots of people with motives for offing her. Her stepson by her first marriage, Claude, wants her money. The local millionaire, Nikolas Markos, wants her architectural treasure of a house rather than his own ugly pile and, now that she's dead, will be able to live in it after his son Gideon marries Sophie's daughter Prunella. Prunella and Gideon gain from Sophie's shuffling off of the mortal coil because now there's less impediment to their marriage plans, which Sophie had seemed intent on thwarting. The doctor, as noted, is scheduled to inherit the bulk of Sophie's money, and there are lesser, but non-negligible, bequests to others.

Just to add an extra motive for all concerned, Sophie's first husband, killed long ago in the war, took with him to the grave the secret of the whereabouts of the Black Alexander, a fabulously valuable one-of-a-kind postage stamp.

As I say, motives everywhere. It's through dazzling us with motives that Marsh most effectively deceives us.

Although we tend to think of Marsh as one of the four Queens of Golden Age Crime -- the others being Sayers, Allingham and Christie -- it's easy to forget that she was the funniest of them. Allingham could be very funny too and Christie had her moments pretty frequently, but for sheer sustained mirth in a detective novel Marsh took some beating.

As I was reading *Grave Mistake* (retitled, I think unfortunately, *A Grave Mistake* in many editions) it occurred to me that her comedic secret lay not so much in the jokes and bits of situational humor -- although

there are plenty of those -- as in her detail writing, especially her use of unorthodox adjectives.

To take just a single example, at one point we're told that an important pick-me-up at any police station is a cup of strong tea and a couple of recalcitrant biscuits (cookies).

What a lovely term: "*recalcitrant* biscuits." I can see them now, sitting all woebegone on their chipped white china plate.

As I was reading *Grave Mistake* a lot of it felt a tad familiar. I assumed I must have read the book decades ago, during the period when I romped through great swathes of GAD, including many of Marsh's novels. Yet I had no idea about who the killer was nor the location of the Black Alexander, both of which are quite striking aspects of the book. Furthermore, every now and then I was remembering something *visually*; a particular example concerns the village idiot's habit of camping inside the graveyard hedge and, from the nest he's made himself in there, scaring unwary passers-by. Yet, as shown by a quick rummage in IMDB, *Grave Mistake* wasn't the basis for any of the episodes in the short-lived Roderick Alleyn TV series way back when and doesn't seem to have been adapted for the screen otherwise. I'm wondering if the novel might have been cannibalized at some point for some completely unrelated series -- *Midsomer Murder*, summat like that. But who knows?

George says

#30 in the suave and debonair, Scotland Yard Superintendent Roderick Alleyn mystery series. Alleyn is detached, sophisticated and expensively educated.

A wealthy woman, whose friends and family think her to be a hypochondriac goes to a hotel for a rest cure with medical supervision and suddenly dies; an apparent suicide. There are a number of people who will benefit from her death along with a surprising will. A surprise from her autopsy brings Alleyn into the case. Interesting cast of characters from a wastrel stepson, millionaire neighbors who covet the deceased mansion, the long time friend and the suspicious doctor from her past.

Abbey says

1978, Inspector Alleyn, small village and upper crust-y society; cosy police procedural, classic. Story wonderful, narration poor.

When a spoiled and self-indulgent middle-aged woman suddenly dies at a posh "rest hotel", the initial verdict appears to be suicide. But her many friends swear it was most unlike her, and Alleyn and Fox aren't comfortable with the case either.

Nifty little time-capsule of a story that although set in early 1970s seemed to fit far better in the early 1950s, with its tightly structured social strata and its attitudes towards women. Yet this is a superbly crafted "village cosy", complete with a long, leisured set-up, complicated unraveling, and careful denouement.

For this reread I listened to
1986, Chivers Audio Books, read by Jane Asher

Asher's narration was extremely annoying, progressing to downright aggravating by the end. Her use of European accents was abominable, and a definite problem, as one of the major characters is supposedly Swiss in origin; she couldn't make up her mind whether he had a French or a German accent, and every now and then threw in what appeared to be some sort of Balkan just for contrast.

And we won't mention The Greek Millionaire's accent, which was sometimes Italian, sometimes almost Greek, often also Balkan. And she'd slide accents around, not keeping the lines clear as to which character was speaking at any given time. aggggh. Never going to listen to Asher again if I can help it!! Think she's been "fair" on some other reads I've listened to, but on this one with its multitude of foreign accents? Terrible.

Heather says

Charming. I particularly liked the ecumenical vicar.

Andrea says

A solid page-turner, again revolving like other Marsh novels around an older woman. Although Sybil Foster's faults revolve around vanity and selfishness, she did not seem to be a particularly unkind or cruel woman (the will made in a temperament aside). She is not hated, yet she is signally unloved.

The conclusion of the story is unusual in capturing the murderer, but leaving a deliberately sour tang with other story threads.

Richard says

If you like Agatha Christie, you'll enjoy Ngaio Marsh. A good village mystery much like an episode of Midsomer's Murder.

Bettie? says

<http://bettie.booklikes.com/blog>
