



Death on the Cherwell

Mavis Doriel Hay

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For Miss Cordell, principal of Persephone College, there are two great evils in the world: unladylike behavior among her students and bad publicity for the college. So her prim and cosy world is turned upside down when a secret society of undergraduates meets by the river on a gloomy January afternoon, only to find the drowned body of the college bursar floating in her canoe.

The police assume that a student prank got out of hand, but the resourceful Persephone girls suspect foul play, and take the investigation into their own hands. Soon they uncover the tangled secrets that led to the bursar's death - and the clues that point to a fellow student.

This classic mystery novel, with its evocative setting in an Oxford women's college, is now republished for the first time since the 1930s with an introduction by the award-winning crime writer Stephen Booth.

Death on the Cherwell Details

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Author : Mavis Doriel Hay

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From Reader Review *Death on the Cherwell* for online ebook

Rosemary says

The British Library has been reprinting lesser-known Golden-Age mysteries in the last several years under its "Crime Classics" imprint, including three by Mavis Doriel Hay, of which *Death on the Cherwell* is the second (the first is *Murder on the Underground*, and the third is *The Santa Klaus Murder*).

The setting is a women's college at Oxford, where the much-despised Bursar, Myra Denning, is drifting lifeless in her own canoe. She's been drowned and loaded back into the boat, but who could have killed her? And why?

Given the setting and the fact that Hay's novel originally came out the same year as Dorothy Sayers' masterpiece *Gaudy Night* (1935), the easiest way to assess *Death on the Cherwell* is to say that it's no *Gaudy Night*. There are some amusing characters here, and some witty observations about college life, but on the whole, this is a pretty thin piece of detective fiction. It's entertaining as a period piece, but doesn't stand the test of time, IMHO.

I may, however, go ahead and read Hay's third book, since it seems to get better reviews:
<http://prettysinister.blogspot.com/20...>

If you love stuff from this era and have run through all your Sayers, Allingham, Marsh, Wentworth, and so forth, I strongly recommend the recently republished mysteries by Clara Benson.

Damaskcat says

This is an interesting detective story originally published in the same year as Dorothy L Sayers' 'Gaudy Night' which was also takes place in Oxford. It is set in and around the fictional Persephone College where a dead don is found floating in her canoe along the Cherwell on a cold January afternoon. The four undergraduates who discover her decide to try and find out who murdered her. She appeared to have drowned but as several people remark you can't actually drown in a canoe and to drown in the river and then put yourself neatly back in the canoe is an impossibility!

The Scotland Yard detective takes his career in his hands and enlists the four girls in his search for the truth as they can probably find out some of the facts more easily than he can. They seem to work well together. The local detective, Detective Inspector Wythe, also appeared in this author's first book - 'Murder Underground'. Some of the attitudes will seem archaic to modern readers but they need to be viewed in the context of the age in which they are written.

If you like your crime novels to be well plotted and with touches of humour then you will probably enjoy this one. It has stood the test of time very well overall and will be a delight to the many twenty first century fans of the Golden Age of British crime fiction writing.

Aarathi Burki says

I couldn't read beyond 5th chapter it was not at all appealing and the characters I found to be too silly and the ladies were all busybody and hard to believe types

Rosemarie says

The rating for the charming little mystery is actually 3 and a half stars. The novel had an interesting plot, but the writing style was weaker than the plot.

Linda Hill says

Persephone Ladies College in Oxford is plunged into scandal when their bursar is found floating down the river in her own canoe – murdered.

My, my. I don't think I've ever been so flummoxed by writing a book review before. I honestly have no real idea what I think to *Death on the Cherwell*. At times I found it less of a crime thriller and more of a social commentary of a rather elitist society.

Whilst there is a crystal clear description of the college setting, I wasn't really able to distinguish between the undergraduates especially well, except perhaps for Draga because she is 'foreign'. And this is my difficulty. I found many aspects of *Death on the Cherwell* so vividly evocative of 1930s privileged England that they are almost offensive to a modern reader. The comments about Draga being odd because she's foreign, the rather sexist, and sometimes downright misogynistic, attitudes to women felt uncomfortable and yet I did enjoy the book.

Reading *Death on the Cherwell* made me think of the Famous Five and Secret Seven books by Enid Blyton in my childhood so that it evoked happy memories of reading as a child. I enjoyed that fact that there was a mystery to be solved in finding out how Bursar Denning came to have drowned but was in the canoe and I found the era fascinating. The rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge, the choosing of the correct hotel to be seen in, the references to 'lekkers', the correct positioning of hats and having crumpets toasted on fires in rooms all provided a vivid sense of the 1930s. The concept of propriety comes roaring through the writing so that I really don't think I'd have survived living in the era.

I think in a way, the actual plot is subsidiary for me as a reader. I enjoyed the story, I didn't have to think too hard and I was entertained. However, more compelling was the insight into the society of the time when *Death on the Cherwell* was written. Reading *Death on the Cherwell* as a fast-paced crime thriller of the kind with which we are now familiar might leave readers disappointed. Reading it as an intellectual exercise in looking at how crime writing has changed or as an historical snapshot of a particular decade makes it engaging and fascinating. I think it's a book that will polarise readers. When I've finally made up my mind what I think I'll let you know, but I would say, read *Death on the Cherwell* for yourself and make your own judgement.

Highlyeccentric says

As you can see, I read this on the journey from Geneva to Lancashire (actually, I'd started it in Grenoble - and the book itself had been carted around all summer, including to Australia and back, before that!). It was something of an impulse purchase: I fell in love with the British Library Crime Classics display at Waterstones in Oxford, and found I couldn't get them in the AU Kobo store, so I ended up buying this one in hard copy in Leeds. It's the kind of book I would generally prefer to read in e-book, but the covers of this series are so delightful, I had to have one.*

In the opening chapters we meet four undergraduates of a girls' college in Oxford, who are gathering to form a secret society. Their shenanigans are disrupted by the discovery of a canoe, complete with the dead body of the college bursar. The headmistress, who loathes impropriety and publicity, attempts to keep a lid on the situation, but with the police involved and mysterious rumours flying, the four undergrads set out to investigate matters. Was the bursar murdered, and who put her body in the canoe? At what time did the canoe come down the river past the neighbouring mens' college, and was the bursar alive at the time? Why does one of their fellow undergraduates seem to be hiding something? And what is the connection between the bursar's hitherto unknown niece, and a reclusive oxford don?

This book won a great deal of leniency from me on the first page with its wry description of undergraduates as 'not quite sane, and indeed not quite human'. The setting, and the cosy feel of the whole thing, is vivid and warming. There were two significant drawbacks throughout: one, that the four girls at the centre of the book hardly had distinct characters; and two, some predictable for the period but generally distasteful ethnic stereotyping of an eastern european character. The denouement seemed to fizzle a little - the inquest being an entirely separate thing from the detective (and by this point the girls have faded into the background in favour of the chief inspector) figuring out what happened and why. It allows for a tasteful sort of ending- no disgrace brought on any august institutions - but I suspect that the narrative tension would have been better sustained if the two denouement threads could have unravelled simultaneously (I'm thinking of the inquest scenes in DuMaurier's Rebecca - there, too, there are whole chunks of the resolution which are separate from the court proceeding, but the court proceeding serves to increase rather than dissipate tension).

The edition is strengthened by a historical introduction, framing Hay in the context of golden age crime, and noting reasons why her work has remained obscure in comparison to, say, Dorothy L Sayers. I definitely recommend it, not as a work of outstanding genius, but as a charming read and an interesting recovery from mid-century obscurity.

*As it happens, the US publisher (Poisoned Pen Press) has generously sent me an ARC of the forthcoming 'The Division Bell Mystery' in epub, and I'm every bit as delighted by it as by Death on the Cherwell. Review anon! Apparently my stock-in-trade for long reviews is shaping up to be mystery novels. Who'd have guessed it?

Emma Rose Ribbons says

I enjoyed this so much. School-set murder mysteries are one of my pet genres and this was really good, plus it's set in Oxford which is my happy place. The one thing I would have liked for it to have is girl detectives - the beginning of the novel has some of the undergrads investigate for a bit but then a detective takes over and he didn't have much charisma (though he was okay). The introduction to this edition is especially good as it reminds us of the sort of Oxford-set murder mystery tradition and does mention *Gaudy Night*. While *Death on the Cherwell* doesn't delve as deep into gender issues in academia and in institutions in general as the masterpiece that is *Gaudy Night*, it does contain some very interesting details and some commentary on that. There's also a foreign student who's introduced with some stereotypical characterization but the author does debunk some of it later on in the novel so do stick with it until the end, it gets better in its dealing with issues of race. I highly recommend this - in fact, I'm really surprised not everyone's talking about this already.

AngryGreyCat says

This is another re-released British Library Crime Classic. *Death on the Cherwell* involves a group of young women, students at an Oxford Women's College, who have formed a secret "club" or group, mainly it seems for the purpose of complaining about the college bursar, Miss Denning. The girls find the bursar dead, at first apparently drowned, but very quickly found to be murdered. They join in investigating the murder with Detective Inspector Wythe. The story ebbs and flows, there are parts that are very good, particularly after the niece arrives and some of the conversational pieces are excellent. Fans of college based mysteries will in particular enjoy this. I liked it but not as much as the John Bude books, also released as part of this set by the British Library.

Ruth says

For me this book was like the Curate's Egg - good in parts! I really enjoyed the conversations that the girls had, and also the book was lifted for me when Sally's sister arrived and later when the Bursar's niece finally appeared in Oxford after much discussion of her arrival. There were also a couple of stand out sections such as the incident with the poetry book in Blackwell's Bookshop which was very funny. I appreciated the humour of several light-hearted episodes in the book.

But, on the other hand, there were long sections devoted to establishing alibis and calculating the routes various people took during the relevant timings which I found quite stolid and heavy-going.

I think the book follows the typical Golden Age detective fiction format of this period in that it sets a puzzle which has to be meticulously worked out until the right solution is arrived at. So I think it's my preference for a more character-led story which hindered my enjoyment and I think others would find it a satisfying read.

Catie says

3.5 Stars

BLCC buddy read with @bookishsteph1 - September 2016

Gerry says

When undergraduates from Oxford's all-girl Persephone College meet on a cold and dreary January afternoon by the River Cherwell for a certain mysterious confabulation, they are surprised by a canoe floating, apparently empty down the river.

But as it passes close by beneath them they quickly realise that it is not empty and that there is someone lying in it. They pull it ashore only to discover that it is the body of their erstwhile bursar, Miss Myra Denning.

It seems at first as though she had drowned for she was soaking wet but it is soon realised that she would have been unable to get back into the canoe had that been the case. So the girls' leader, Sally Watson sends Gwyneth Pane hot foot back to the college to inform the Principal, Miss Cordell.

Sally and her two compatriots, Daphne Loveridge and Nina Harson, remain with the body awaiting the arrival of Miss Cordell, who by the time she arrives down by the river has with her Doctor Shuter. They are soon joined by Inspector Wythe and between them they discover a mark on the back of Miss Denning's head. This leads them to suspect that there might have been foul play involved.

At first it seems as though it could have been a girls' prank that went wrong but when Wythe and his colleague Inspector Braydon begin to investigate it is apparent that this was not the case. In the evocative setting of the Oxford Colleges, they begin to interview those who were in and around the river on the afternoon in question.

And it all gets very confusing because it would seem that nobody saw anything despite all the activity that had obviously been going on in the area concerned. However, once the detectives, with the help of the four girls, begin some serious questioning all sorts of stories come out of the woodwork.

And as they intensify their search for the culprit some surprising facts emerge, even though many of those questioned continually mislead the officers and often do not tell the truth. Indeed, at one point Inspector Braydon is obliged to say, 'We do prefer the truth. It gives us less trouble.'

Once that way forward is established it becomes (murkily) clear what has happened and the mystery is resolved.

The novel is the second of Mavis Doriel Hay's canon of three such novels and enjoyable and atmospheric tale that it is, perhaps it is a pity that she did not write more of this genre and decided to concentrate her efforts on writing craft books!

Susan says

Written in 1935 and this is fairly obvious by the style of story telling which does occasional get a bit irritating.

On a January afternoon in Oxford the body of the college bursar of Persephone College is found dead in her

canoe by four of the college's students. It is these Persephone girls who suspect foul play and decide to investigate.

A NetGalley Book

Andrea says

The bursar of a women's college in Oxford comes floating down the river - drowned and yet still in her canoe.

A straightforward sort of mystery. It jumped around through quite a few characters though and I was sorry the original amateur detectives gave way to a police detective.

Nikki says

Obviously, when you read this, you can't help but compare it to *Gaudy Night* if you're a Sayers fan, or at least versed in your Golden Age crime fiction. It's set at a women's college in Oxford, after all, though it lacks the maturity and reflection of Sayers' novel — the characters are mostly undergraduates, and there's some leaning on stereotypes like the one single foreign student who attends the college (and doesn't think about time, or tidiness, or anything else in the same way as British students — of course). The characters get all entangled in solving a mystery half for the fun of it, although there is the same focus on protecting the reputation of the college as Harriet and her peers feel in *Gaudy Night*.

Overall, it's entertaining, with a fairly obvious (to me, anyway) mystery; it's an interesting read as part of my ongoing dive into Golden Age crime fiction — but I'm not in a hurry to read Mavis Doriel Hay's other two novels republished by the British Library. I probably will, but they haven't catapulted to the top of my list.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Debbie says

"*Death on the Cherwell*" is a mystery that was originally published in 1935 and is set in Oxford. Four girls from the women's college started investigating the mystery (giving it a cozy mystery feel), but soon Detective-Inspector Braydon arrived from Scotland Yard. He asked the girls to tell him the information they had uncovered, set them to explore potentially useful (and less disruptive) avenues, and pulled various clues together to discover whodunit.

There were many, tangled clues, but it wasn't difficult to guess whodunit by the time the detective named his suspect. It was interesting to follow how he sorted out the clues and gathered the needed evidence to arrest the suspect. The antics of the undergraduates were humorous and gave a lighthearted feel to the story.

There was no sex. There was occasional use of bad language. Overall, I'd recommend this enjoyable novel.

I received an ebook review copy of this book from the publisher through NetGalley.

