



Banking on Death

Emma Lathen

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This universally acclaimed debut by Lathen (a pseudonym for the writing team of Mary J. Latsis and Martha Henissart) introduced mystery fans to amateur sleuth/Wall Street banker John Putnam Thatcher. Newsweek describes Lathen as "a master plotter, an elegant stylist, a comic genius and a purist who never sacrifices logic for surprise effect".

Banking on Death Details

Date : Published February 1st 1994 by O. Penzler Books (first published 1961)

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Author : Emma Lathen

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From Reader Review Banking on Death for online ebook

Carolyn says

This rating review will be for all Lathan's John Thatcher books except for those not given three stars.

I adore Lathan's wit and satire, right along with her characters and plots. Reviewers customarily compare their favorite witty authors to Jane Austen; in Lathan's case, I believe the comparison is warranted.

Judy Hall says

John Putnam Thatcher is Senior Vice President of the Sloan Guaranty Trust, the third largest bank in the world. He is a respected and recognized figure on Wall Street. He returns to his office one day to find Arthur Schneider demanding to meet with the top man to discuss his family trust. Thatcher agrees to see him and finds himself first irritated and then intrigued by this small bank trust - a nuisance account, as far as the Sloan is concerned because of its size.

There's a missing heir and Thatcher helps the trust officer assigned to the case find the man. Unfortunately, it's too late. He's been murdered.

Thatcher is intrigued and can't leave it to the police, so he uses his financial contacts to do some investigating.

This book was published in 1962 and written by two women who had first hand knowledge of this world. It's an intriguing view of the professional world where women are in the typing pool and bring coffee to their bosses. Or they are trophy wives to middle aged men. Or sulky, strident women complaining of neglect. Or worse, truly forgotten by their ambitious husbands and left to fend for themselves. I haven't decided, yet, if the books are sexist, quietly feminist, or just reflecting the times. For a man's world, the women really stood out.

It's a good mystery. I was ahead of Thatcher with a couple of the clues, but in his defense, I read this book 30 years ago, so I had a inkling of what was happening.

Lisa Kucharski says

A fantastic mystery, and having read a later book first, I am amazed at how rich and full the characters are right at the start. Some laugh out loud passages as well, at least for me. A wonderful look at the world of banking and how money certainly brings out the drama in everything.

Julie says

Really enjoyable and wry, with characters that are fun to spend time with.

Bryn (Plus Others) says

Boring, but I might try another one, since it was a first novel. I wanted less dry details of where everyone drove/walked/flew (except as relevant to solving the mystery) and more revelation of life in the period. And goodness, it was so misogynistic!

Ken says

I particularly recommend this series (and the 6-book series written by the same authors under the pseudonym "R.B. Dominic") to those who like the Nero Wolfe mysteries. Stout's Wolfe stories are my favorite mysteries, and Lathen's are the closest to Stout (at his best) that I've found--closest in tone, plotting, and overall intelligence.

Andrea says

I picked this up after seeing the author mentioned on Rachel Neumeier's blog. Reading the ebook involved wading through two prologues explaining that Emma Lathen was a pen-name for two very accomplished women, calling them an American Christie, and the detective Nero Wolfe with a portfolio. It's a bad idea to make such comparisons because the reader inevitably spends their time comparing the offering unfavourably to two such giants.

Banking on Death is not a particularly remarkable read, but it was pleasant enough, and I'll probably continue on to see how 'Lathen' matured as a writer (the two authors apparently alternated paragraphs). I was a little put off by the treatment of women in the story - there were quite a few women, but none of them came across very well (and fell into categories labelled in text as slut, lush, naive, down-trodden and 'secretary').

Mmyoung says

A tightly written murder mystery written in the early 1960s. Like many books written that long ago a large number of the difficulties faced by characters investigating the crime or, indeed, just carrying out their normal job related duties, have disappeared from modern life due to technological changes. Simply getting news about a murder that occurred in another city in the same state involve locating copies of that city's newspapers in bound form from the nearest library and reading each edition looking for any mentions. Finding a 'lost' family member takes weeks even though that person has not changed his name or his social security number and even though he is a senior office in a successful company.

At the Sloan Guarantee Trust, phones are all landlines and calls are answered by female secretaries who type letters and take dictation. Messenger boys carry files from one floor of the building to another. Entire rooms are filled with filing cabinets. Everyone drinks during the day even if they are planning to drive away to their next meeting and everyone smokes and doesn't ask permission to do so.

Readers of mysteries written decades ago are used to these moments of realizing that the past is a foreign country but the Lathen books add a special flavour to that sense of deep dislocation for the present day reader. At the time these books were written investment banking was still a world filled with extremely cautious and careful individuals and finance was shaped by the wall between investment and commercial, created by the Glass–Steagall Act in 1933 (and not repealed until 1999.) The Wall Street security analysts of the Lathen series are financially conservative long term thinkers who frown on anyone trying to circumvent the system. And that fact, more than any changes in technology or gender roles, may make the world of New York finance of the early 1960s seem more unfamiliar (and unbelievable) than much science fiction to many readers just discovering this series now

Jean says

This did not get 5 stars because there were 3 more suitable candidates for whodunit and I am not consoled by Thatcher saying it wasn't premeditated and with a good lawyer he would get a lesser charge. In the meantime there is an entirely suitable solution to the business problems that are raised, but not really resolved. So I didn't like that the wrong guy did it.

Liz says

The first in the series, and lacking in some of the humour of later books. The plot gets a bit bogged down in finances on occasion so my attention wandered. I did have a fleeting glimpse of the identity of the murderer by picking up a vital clue.

Alton Motobu says

Not a cozy Christmas mystery, this is supposed to be a clever whodunit with a Christmas theme, but it falls flat. It is basically a missing persons case when one of the heirs to a trust cannot be found, and John Putnam Thatcher, investment banker, must follow up. He assigns the leg work to his lowly assistant, who finds that the missing heir has been recently murdered. All of the other heirs are now suspects, and Thatcher tracks them down, interviews them, and gets the killer to confess. Straight forward mystery with no plot twists or clever ending. The biggest drawback was the large cast of characters in a relatively short book (173 pages); there were over 40 named characters, many of whom had no bearing on the story, but it was a headache keeping track of everyone.

Harley says

Wow, Mike just reminded me of Emma Lathen. We read so many of those. I have to find one to thumb through and refresh my memory of her character, John Thatcher, a Wall Street banker. Back in the 60s and 70s. These were really good mysteries and I'm going to try to identify the others that I read.

Sue Law says

A book I regularly re-read, introducing banker John Putnam Thatcher. A family trust is due to be distributed but one of the beneficiaries has been missing for years. When he turns up dead it is naturally Thatcher's responsibility to ensure that it does not affect the legalities of the distribution.

Vicki Cline says

It was interesting (re)reading the first book in the series after having read a very late one followed by the second in the series. In both 1 and 2, the focus is on John Thatcher himself, assisted by one of his subordinates in the bank, Ken Nicolls. As usual, we learn a good bit about the primary suspects in the murder, but I wasn't able to pick out the culprit this time. It's always interesting to see how many different motives there are in these business-based mysteries. And there's plenty of wry humor, as well.

Joy says

Compulsively readable characters and tantalizing plotting. No sensationalism necessary.

Read 4 times
