

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 1 transcript

[THEME MUSIC: jaunty Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint gradually fading in]

CHARIS: Hello, and thank you for joining us for the first episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Charis Ellison--

SHARON: --And I'm Sharon Hsu. We're two friends sleuthing our way through the Peter Wimsey mystery novels by Dorothy L. Sayers, and today we're starting our investigation at the very beginning, with WHOSE BODY?, the first Lord Peter Wimsey novel, published in 1923. In the early 1920s, Sayers was struggling with financial uncertainty and, looking for income, asked herself what people were interested in. She decided that everyone liked detectives and the aristocracy. So she wrote about an aristocratic detective.

CHARIS: In his first case, Lord Peter encounters two mysteries--one is an unidentified dead body, found in a bathtub that doesn't belong to him, and unseasonably dressed in a pair of pince-nez. The other is a middle-aged financier who appears to have vanished into the night without his clothes, without his glasses, and without a trace.

If you haven't read WHOSE BODY? before, don't worry--we won't give away the whodunnit today, but we do hope that, after listening to this episode, you'll read the book and join us again in two weeks for our second episode, where we'll discuss the solution of the case.

SHARON: But for now, let's go back to a rainy night 1920s London, and dig into WHOSE BODY?

[The sound of heavy rain, and the crunch of footsteps on wet gravel, as if someone is walking past us]

CHARIS: So, Sharon, we're coming in on page one of WHOSE BODY? and we're being introduced to a character who's described as having "a long amiable face that looked as if it had generated spontaneously from his tophat, as white maggots breed from Gorgonzola." And this is our introduction to Lord Peter Wimsey.

SHARON: [laughing] Quite the hero, right? Just the, uh, really, really ripe for romantic fantasy, and so forth [laughs]--

CHARIS: [laughs] You know I was reading a little bit of background today, and reading some summaries of some of the criticisms that have been leveled against Sayers, and how one of them is how she made Peter too perfect. I'm just like, but she did compare him to maggots! [laughing] On day one!

SHARON: [laughing] Well, but also, also a good Gorgonzola!

CHARIS: That's true! Not to be underestimated.

SHARON: Yes, maybe she's just...really into cheese.

CHARIS: [laughing] Aren't we all, aren't we all into cheese.

SHARON: [laughs]

CHARIS: So tell me a little bit about your impressions from these first pages.

SHARON: I mean, I think it was interesting for me to revisit this and kind of discover how much of what I come to know as Peter's physical description doesn't happen this early on?

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: Later, you know, we come to learn that he has a long nose and that he has this very aristocratic bearing and, and he can be quite formidable... but yeah, as sort of a first description, there's quite a lot left to the imagination, which I find interesting.

And! I was also noticing this time the fact that he lives in Piccadilly, in what is described as "a block of new, perfect, and expensive flats." So there's this almost distancing of the aristocratic self, right? We learn much later on in the books that the Denver dukedom goes back hundreds of years, but here Peter is really more associated with the new and the novel and the expensive, almost in this kind of nouveau riche way that separates him from his family and from the kind of lineage that he comes from.

Yeah, I don't know, I feel like Sayers really leads with that sort of silly-ass persona of his that you come to find out is often this kind of front he puts on, but right now, I mean, between the maggots and the expensive flats and the fact that he's trying to get to an auction, he seems quite silly, I think.

CHARIS: Yeah, really leaning into the Wooster aspect of him. But then we get really quickly to this delightful conversation he has on the phone with his mother. And then the following conversation with Bunter is [chuckles] what is he saying? "Her Grace tells me that a respectable Battersea architect has discovered a dead man in his bath!"

SHARON: And dear Bunter says, "That's very gratifying, my lord"! [laughs]

CHARIS: The irreverence that we're introduced to right off the bat in Peter's attitude is really interesting, because of course that attitude shifts as we get a little further into the book and he has a little bit of a crisis of conscience. Conscience? Conscience.

SHARON: Conscience.

CHARIS: What are words. [laughs] They're things I can't say.

SHARON: Well, a word that I could not say for a long time is pince-nez, which features prominently in this book [laughs]. Because I, like so many precocious readers, encountered it only in text for a long time and was just convinced that it was 'pens nehz', so, little, little bit of background about me [chuckles].

CHARIS: So having been introduced to the silly ass about town character of Peter, he runs off to see this dead body, and we're introduced to the architect Thipps, who is such a humorous character, he's a little bit sad, and he's so self aware of the class difference between himself and Lord Peter. And that plays out, I think, for humor a lot, in these--

SHARON: Mmhm.

CHARIS: Like, in this encounter that happens in this first chapter.

SHARON: I think something interesting that, even as the class stuff is played for humor, you do get the sense later on that Thipps and poor Gladys are, because of their class standing, a lot more vulnerable to, just the arm of the law, right?

CHARIS: Mmhm.

SHARON: They get taken up and charged as suspects, and the inspector doesn't seem willing to account for all the little discrepancies that Peter is pointing out.

CHARIS: Right. There's no evidence whatsoever, except for the presence of a dead body in the bathroom.

SHARON: [laughing] Which, you know, often is...

CHARIS: ...which is a, a little bit of a something.

SHARON: But right, I mean poor Thipps really gets run roughshod during the inquest.

CHARIS: Mmhm.

SHARON: And I think--I mean this isn't really a fully formed thought, but, you know, Peter really, in the sort of genre of detective fiction that Sayers is working with up to this point, I think Peter might be the first aristocratic detective? There's certainly, I mean there's gentleman detectives, but it's--generally when you're coming out of Victorian literature the private detective who doesn't do it for their living, you know, who maybe tends to be a little bit more upper class, but detectives from the police are always middle class to, you know, almost a little bit vulgarly

upwardly mobile from the working class, and I--just kind of thinking about this in relation to the next book that we're gonna read, CLOUDS OF WITNESS, where--spoiler alert--Peter's brother, the duke, is accused of murder, and just how differently the law plays out for, you know, a peer, right? Someone where this, the novel is going to revolve around "oh he has to be tried in the House of Lords" versus poor little Mr. Thipps the architect, and poor Gladys, who just get thrown in the clapper immediately.

CHARIS: Yeah. Well, and speaking of upwardly mobile middle-class detectives, we have a middle-class detective in this book in Inspector Parker--

SHARON: Yes!

CHARIS: I guess *Detective* Inspector Parker, who is Wimsey's sort of gatekey into these investigations.

SHARON: Yeah, Parker's the one who brings in the fact that Sir Reuben Levy is missing, and complicates the... and I don't know if you can ever call a case wherein there's a naked dead body in a bathtub *uncomplicated*, but he, you know, one case turns into two, and this is the thing that Peter's trying to figure out for most of the book is--

CHARIS: Right

SHARON: --is do these mysteries fit together or not?

CHARIS: Do you think that at the beginning he's thinking at all that they fit together? Or is he just thinking that he started two hares at once and the similarities are coincidental? 'Cause the thing is that Inspector Suggs connects the two cases, and it seems to me that Parker and Wimsey are both very dismissive of that? They're just like "Oh yes, a dead man with no clothes has appeared here, and a man with no clothes has disappeared over there, so they must be the same!" And they're laughing about how simplistic Suggs' attitude is.

SHARON: I mean, Peter says "Suggs is like a detective in a novel"--

CHARIS: [laughing]

SHARON: Which is... I mean, there are so many pointed little bits in this book, "If we were in Sherlock Holmes, we'd be doing blah!" or "If we were in a detective novel this thing would happen!" Yeah, I don't know at which point he starts thinking that they might be one mystery.

CHARIS: Well, I think that it's something organic that happens later in the book. We're getting towards the end where we're treading on dangerous ground, you know, but at the end of the book, Peter's realization about the solution of the case comes to him all at once--

SHARON: Right

CHARIS: And you know, it talks about how he doesn't see part of the thing, and he doesn't doubt it all, he just sees the whole thing all at once, and he's absolutely sure of it.

SHARON: I think that there's this way in which they maybe both have an intuition, but yeah, for a lot of the book it is presented more as Parker asking for Peter's help on *his* case and then these coincidences kind of keep cropping up.

CHARIS: Right. So, we've wandered off a bit from the body in the bath...

SHARON: Yes. Well, Charis, I came across a really interesting tidbit about that. I was doing a little bit of background looking into Sayers's letters and other bits about her life, kind of around the time that she was writing or composing the first draft of WHOSE BODY? And she wrote a letter to her mother in 1921--I believe it's the first mention of WHOSE BODY? in her letters--and she says, "My detective story begins brightly with a fat lady found dead in her bath, with nothing on but her pince nez. Now why did she wear pince nez in her bath? If you can guess, you will be in a position to lay hands upon her murderer, but he's a very cool and cunning fellow." Which... I mean, the story we end up with... does not... strays quite a bit from that early synopsis.

CHARIS: Yes, um, on a couple of counts. Because obviously the pince nez are a bit of a red herring and it's no longer the body of a fat woman.

SHARON: Right, it's a middle-aged man.

CHARIS: Yes, and I think that that is very interesting alteration in the story, and it seems to me, you know, based on some research that you and I have been doing into Sayers's life, it seems that that is something that kind of came out of personal experiences of her own--

SHARON: I mean, on the one hand, there's part of me that's "The author's dead, we don't care!" and not in... that Dorothy Sayers is actually dead, which she is, but just in, in... as a way of reading literature and not really looking at authorial intent. But! Yeah, her biographical details are certainly suggestive.

CHARIS: So Sharon, why don't you tell our good listeners a little bit about what was going on in Sayers's life that might have brought about this abrupt change in the narrative?

SHARON: [laughs] No! The author's dead!

[both laughing]

SHARON: It's fine. Yes, so Sayers's twenties were really marked by... I mean, maybe Millennials now would find this very familiar, but a lot of financial insecurity. She really

floundered a bit after she left Oxford. She was one of the first women to be granted a degree there, but afterward she tried teaching for a bit, she was tutoring, but had a really difficult time getting a foothold financially into adulthood. And so, you know, that's when she comes up with this idea to give Peter all of the things that she couldn't have. Like a car and nice food and a dressing gown and a butler and so forth.

But she was also embroiled in a couple of very unhappy love affairs. One with a man named John Cournos, who will become much more significant when we read *STRONG POISON*. And another man named Bill White whom she ended up having a child out of wedlock with, and nobody knew this about her for a very long time. But the thing that is possibly significant here is that Cournos was a Russian Jewish Englishman [**NOTE:** actually American by nationality, not English, though Sayers met him in England], and he--the old-fashioned parlance would be he threw her over, because *he* claimed that he did not believe in marriage and wanted her to consummate their physical relationship using contraception, and she felt that both those things were very against her belief. So... yeah! Possibly she didn't... feel... great about... Semites? During the composing of this novel?

CHARIS: Yeah, that's an aspect of this novel that you kind of have to confront, the anti-Semitism that lurks in it. Which is something that has been debated. More than one of Sayers's biographers have kind of tackled the subject, and some of them have said she wasn't, she just dealt in stereotypes of the time, and some of them say that yes, she obviously was. I think that I come down on the side of--

SHARON: It doesn't matter if she meant it or not!

CHARIS: Right! It doesn't matter whether it was intentional or not, it's clearly there.

SHARON: Do you want to talk a little bit about some of those instances for our listeners?

CHARIS: Well obviously, I mean, we haven't mentioned so far in the podcast that the body found in the bath is described as having Jewish features and that Sir Reuben Levy, the financier who has disappeared, is a Jewish man.

And there are little tidbits of conversation that happen between the characters. So Peter has a conversation with his mother, the Dowager Duchess, where she's telling him a little bit about the family history, and about how Lady Levy used to be Christine Ford and ran off to marry, that there was trouble about her marrying a Jew. And the way that the Dowager Duchess talks is, you know, like very run-on, very fluttery, and she substitutes words incorrectly sometimes. But she says, "I'm sure some Jews are very good people, and personally I'd much rather they believed something. Though of course it must be very inconvenient, what with not working on Saturdays and circumcising the poor little babies and everything depending on the new moon and the funny kind of meat they have with such a funny-sounding name and never being able

to have bacon for breakfast." And... it's funny, but it also... there's a lot of Othering the Jewish people that happens by all the characters, even when they seem to be being positive?

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: Even Freddy Arbuthnot, who's interested in marrying Sir Reuben's daughter, is kind of dismissive of the Jewish faith of the family.

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: He's just like oh, you know, it's irrelevant to me, as opposed to it being something that should be important.

SHARON: Right, could possibly *deeply* matter!

CHARIS: Right!

SHARON: Well, and I feel like, throughout, most of the characters... I mean, it's sort of that classic, racist thing to say, right? "Well, he's one of the *good* ones," you kind of get that from most of the characters. I mean, even Sir Reuben's own manservant--

CHARIS: Right

SHARON: Mr. Graves says... where is it... Mr. Graves says to Bunter, "I don't hold with Hebrews as a rule, but no one could call Sir Reuben vulgar, and my lady at any rate is county, Miss Ford she was, one of the Hampshire Fords, and both of them always most considerate." So... yeah, it's sort of this aspect of people approve of or like or don't mind Sir Reuben because he's 'one of the good ones' or a 'credit to his race' or 'not like all of those other ones' and that is *really* uncomfortable. That is... yeah.

CHARIS: Yeah. There's very much an element of... in spite of? That 'Ah, he's a good man in spite of'?

SHARON: Yeah. And it really plays into some really uncomfortable I think Orientalist tropes of, you know, men of color coming over and marrying "*our* women." I mean the fact that they keep pointing to how Lady Levy was Christine Ford, you know, she was gentry--

CHARIS: Mmhmm

SHARON: --She was English.

CHARIS: Of course then we also get into some of the other aspects, like the fact that Sir Reuben Levy is portrayed as being very kind, very considerate, very devoted to his family, like a

gentle, thoughtful person. And I, I think that you found in Sayers's letters her response to someone's accusation that there's some thrusts against the Jewish race?

SHARON: Yes, not that it means a ton to me, personally? Because there's many things authors can put into their works that they didn't, you know, mean to. But yeah, she writes... she wrote a letter in 1936. Someone had been asking her about a French translation of WHOSE BODY? and she gives permission for it. Um, and, I guess, I suppose, from context it seems like she had been asked by the translator if they could, quote, "soften the thrusts against the Jews, if they'd like." And her response is, "They certainly can, if there are any. My own opinion is that the only people that are presented in a favorable light were the Jews." So. Um... yeah... a lot to unpack there... I mean, it is...

CHARIS: Yeah... I think more than what that letter demonstrates is her own lack of awareness of her bias? Which is something that I think is really incredibly relevant today. You know, we see dramas play out on Twitter between authors and books that are being questioned, where there's a tendency for authors to say "That's not what I *meant*" and expect that to be fine?

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: But we've also reached a point socially where I feel like people aren't prepared to accept anyone's intentions, because what do intentions matter if the harm is done?

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: You know?

SHARON: [sighs] Yeah, and it's... you know, I think it's also this complicated thing where... I mean, so much of detective fiction in particular, especially of this period--I mean, not that, you know "She was of her time" is an excuse--but so much of detective fiction actually relies on tropes and stereotypes. And Sayers is certainly relying on a lot of tropes, not even just with Sir Reuben Levy, but, you know, Peter being the empty-headed aristocrat and Parker being sort of the plodding workhorse sidekick. There's a lot of that going on.

CHARIS: Bunter is the gentleman's gentleman.

SHARON: Exactly, yeah.

CHARIS: Yeah, I think it's interesting that Sayers shows a lot of self-awareness elsewhere in the book? You know, she shows a lot of self-awareness about the tropes of a mystery novel, she shows a lot of self-awareness about the ramifications of this kind of situation on a character's mental health, which is something that we may get into maybe in the next episode. But she completely lacks self-awareness about the racial bias. And I think, you know, something that

we'll get into a lot more in the later books, she shows a lack of self-awareness about the classism.

SHARON: Yeah

CHARIS: I think it's interesting to me that she was completely unable to see her own bias in those two areas especially.

SHARON: And something that I want to develop, you know, as a kind of throughline for our own inquiry, is--I feel like she starts, I mean, we've talked a little bit already about kind of the ways class plays into this book, and how Thipps and Gladys and Sugg and sort of these other lower-class characters are portrayed as, you know... not necessarily more vulgar, but more common than Peter and the Dowager Duchess and so forth. Even Bunter is sort of at pains... he doesn't want to be like "those other servants," he's a gentleman's servant. It's sort of interesting to see how he interacts with Sir Reuben Levy's and so forth when he needs to get information out of them. He sort of puts on this persona of being a lot more put upon than he really is, or a lot more resentful of the aristocratic classes.

But I also think that there's something here, and you know, maybe Sayers wasn't even aware of it, but there's... there's kind of this idea too that certain classes and particularly the servant class has access to... if not more specialized, then a different *kind* of knowledge than the aristocracy does. And this knowledge is somehow a bit impenetrable to the aristocracy, right? There's a reason Peter sends Bunter to go and kind of get the information out of the serving maids and the valets and so forth, um--

CHARIS: Right

SHARON: Because Peter is sort of too many steps of class above the laboring class, such that they just wouldn't tell him what he needs to know.

CHARIS: It's kind of like, jumping far ahead, in *HAVE HIS CARCASE* there's kind of a throwaway mention of, you know, one of the characters points out to the police that they have probably made inquiries into their life, and they're like "Yes, we spoke to your charwoman." Which, the charwoman was like a housecleaner who would do the heavy labor, like they would be the person who takes out the rubbish, doing the heavy cleaning. It's something that's gonna come up in some of the later books that even the people who were considered poor a lot of the time still have people who do some of the work for them. Even people who are poor are still gonna have a charwoman who still does some of that heavy labor for them. But this idea that the police went to the charwoman, or, you know... it's like... it's like "Yes, we interviewed your garbageman to get an idea of who you are as a person."

SHARON: Right!

CHARIS: "Because we figure that they know."

SHARON: And the idea that they are the ones who *really* know, right? That there's a public face that people might put on, but that there's sort of, when you're at home it's inescapable, that your servants have access to a kind of private self that other people wouldn't see. So it's actually--I don't know if this was a deliberate inversion of power differentials? It would delight me if it was. But it's something that I think definitely is, is part of the text as well, even as we are kind of critiquing Sayers's lack of her understanding of her class biases.

Speaking of servants--

CHARIS: Yes--

SHARON: Should we talk about how *hideously* underpaid Bunter is? [laughs]

CHARIS: So underpaid!

SHARON: So, dear listeners, Charis did a little bit of digging into this and I feel like there's a clickbait title--

[both laughing]

SHARON: --or at least a hashtag of, you know, Justice for Bunter, Money for Mervyn.

CHARIS: [giggling] Yes, #moneyformervyn! And now I can't remember what the actual numbers were... We know from a conversation in chapter two that Bunter is paid 200 pounds a year, and 200 pounds in 1923, let's see, according to this UK inflation calculator on the Internet... let's see, do the math... [muttering] I'll get an English degree and I'll never have to do math again!

SHARON: [laughs]

CHARIS: Okay, so, according to this Internet calculator, 200 pounds in 1923 is the equivalent of approximately 11,496 pounds in 2017.

SHARON: Which is... now I'm gonna... we should also talk about Sayers portrays Americans, but I'm gonna be very American and say 'How many US dollars is that, Charis?'

CHARIS: That is about 14,500 US dollars.

SHARON: [sighs] Oh boy.

CHARIS: [laughs]

SHARON: [emphatically] The most damning thing is that *two sentences above* the place where Peter says, "Bunter, I pay you two hundred pounds a year to keep your thoughts to yourself," Peter's talking about how he just paid 750 pounds for a book!

CHARIS: A dirty old book in a dead language!

SHARON: [with growing indignation] Yes, and how he thinks fifty pounds might be a ridiculous price for like a piece of camera equipment that, that Bunter was asking him to buy *so that Bunter could further assist him in detection!*

CHARIS: [laughing]

SHARON: [through laughter] This is just! Terrible!

CHARIS: It's like what is money? What is it?

SHARON: What is money? What indeed?

CHARIS: It's like... I've seen a quote from a show that I don't even watch where it's like a rich person just being like "How much does a banana cost? Ten dollars?"

SHARON: Oh yeah! From ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT.

CHARIS: Yeah!

[both laughing]

SHARON: I know, I feel like sometimes people are like, "Why, why is there so much... why do the younger generations have so much college debt? How much could it possibly cost to obtain a college degree? Twenty dollars?"

CHARIS: [laughing] Yeah. I mean, presumably Bunter also gets room and board for free, but... still.

SHARON: Sure, and sometimes, like later on when he's buttering up a suspect, he gets to smoke Lord Peter's cigars and drink Lord Peter's brandy--

CHARIS: Which he richly deserves!

SHARON: But *still*. Just amazing that Bunter did not just burn everything down in the very first book of this series.

CHARIS: But the thing is that Bunter is very much portrayed as a caretaker.

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: We learn a little bit later on in the book that he served with Peter in World War I, in the Great War, and that he feels a certain amount of devotion to him.

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: I think we'll talk a little bit more in the next episode about Peter's PTSD, but we know that Bunter was very instrumental in kind of nursing him back to health and bringing him back to a point where he could participate in society after he came back from the war very badly shell-shocked. And so in addition to being just like horrifically underpaid for doing *any* kind of job, any kind of full-time, 24/7 job, is the fact that Bunter's presence is what makes Peter's lifestyle possible.

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: His assistance, his understanding... I think if Peter had just any other manservant, who didn't understand him as deeply, who didn't anticipate his needs as well, Peter's life couldn't possibly be as fulfilling? And as complex as it is? Because in many ways Bunter is doing a tremendous amount of *emotional* labor in addition to the physical labor for which he is tremendously underpaid.

SHARON: Right. I mean... Charis, is Bunter Peter's wife?

CHARIS: [laughs]

SHARON: And I don't mean that--I don't mean that in a sexual way! [Charis continues to laugh in the background] Just... that is--

CHARIS: Um, that is, I mean, there is... if I say yes, I feel like there is a lot of gender politics to start unpacking about what the role of a wife is in a relationship...

SHARON: I mean, but okay. Like--

CHARIS: But, but, there is a real--

SHARON: *Is* Bunter performing a kind of feminized, caretaking, emotional, bodily needs labor that traditionally, historically, societally within patriarchy has often been associated with women? [both laughing at the obviousness of the point]

CHARIS: I think so. I think so. Although... this brings up an interesting segue way, which is not in our planned notes, so I'm going to ask you to forgive me for springing this on you--

SHARON: How dare you!

CHARIS: Another relationship that strikes me as having similarities, which is loosely tied to Sayers, because they were acquaintances, is Tolkien's relationship between Frodo and Samwise.

SHARON: Oh yeah, and Sam is *absolutely* Frodo's wife!

CHARIS: Yes, absolutely--

SHARON: [laughing] Sorry, Tolkien scholars.

CHARIS: [laughing] Yeah, but it's absolutely a case where you have two male characters and one of them is emotionally vulnerable and feels bound to a task of some kind, and the other one is of a lower class and devoted to them and dedicated to their well-being, including doing the emotional labor of caring for them.

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: And I wonder, given the fact that these come out of a similar time period--I mean, LORD OF THE RINGS wasn't published until later, but, as I think we all know, it drew a lot on Tolkien's experience in the Great War, and kind of the relationships that men had with each other in the trenches, which was a new and terrible experience of what war was. And I wonder how much those two portrayals tie together?

SHARON: Mmhmm. I mean, certainly I think there is a long literary tradition of--

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: --which was based on how English society put itself together historically, of kind of assuming that the homosocial bonds between men, the bonds of being comrades and friends and intellectual partners and brothers-in-arms would go to the same if not greater depths than romantic love between men and women, right? And, and there's a lot written, also, you know, sort of about homosocial love among women of the time, just with societies with more assumptions about, I don't know, inherent gender differences or kind of the relationships people were allowed to have... I certainly think that reading those two... not even really master-servant, but just caretaker-caretakee relationships together makes a lot of sense to me, yeah.

CHARIS: Yeah... I didn't have a segue way away from that!

[both laugh]

CHARIS: I just threw that out there.

SHARON: Well, I think, I mean, I just wrote in the margin, when Bunter's very useful hobby of photography went up, like "Mmm, how convenient." [laughs] Of course! As the perfect servant who completely anticipates Peter's needs, of course he would take up photography!

CHARIS: No, of course!

SHARON: I like to think that in his spare time maybe Bunter goes and photographs roses in the gardens or something.

[both chuckle]

SHARON: Charis, is it time for you to go into raptures about the Dowager Duchess?

CHARIS: [laughs] It's always time for me to go into raptures about the Dowager Duchess!

SHARON: I mean, speaking of caretaking and you know... women.

CHARIS: Yes! I just love her. She's so funny. And, you know, we get, we first meet her in that very opening scene, when she calls on the telephone to casually mention to her son who's interested in crime, that a mutual acquaintance has found a dead body in his bath.

SHARON: No big deal, Peter.

CHARIS: We meet her briefly again when Lord Peter takes Mr. Thipps' mother, because she has no one to take care of her, because Mr. Thipps and their maid have been arrested. And he takes Mrs. Thipps to stay with his own mother, and she very helpfully tells him a little bit of background about the Levy family, just casually drops it into the conversation. But the next time we meet her is after Peter has gone to talk to a character named Mr. Mulligan and pumped him for information and told him an *outrageous* lie about how the Dowager Duchess is throwing a bazaar and wants him to give a talk, and then the Dowager Duchess is confronted with Mr. Mulligan at this luncheon. And he starts telling her about how he's so excited to come to her bazaar, [through laughter] and she doesn't know what he's talking about!

SHARON: But she just rolls with it!

CHARIS: She just rolls with it.

SHARON: She's so great! She's, she's the embodiment of *yes, and!*

CHARIS: [chuckling] To the point that when Peter finally shows up in a panic over how she may have ruined his story, she tells him to go away because she's not done talking to Mr. Mulligan about the bazaar yet!

SHARON: [laughing] And all the money that he's going to spend to sponsor it!

[both laughing]

Which is really, I mean, if you're gonna put an American... is he a railroad baron or an oil baron?

CHARIS: Yes, yes, no he's a railroad king.

SHARON: If you put an American railroad king into your novel, you really should get him to endow at least three little country churches.

CHARIS: Right. I was calling him Mulligan, but he's Milligan.

SHARON: Milligan.

CHARIS: Milligan, yes. And of course the Dowager Duchess is kind of the vehicle by which we hear about some of the inquest--

SHARON: Yeah!

CHARIS: --because she's telling people about it at the luncheon. And her account of it is so funny. 'Cause she inserts her... like, she's a very, she's a character with a very strong voice. She really inserts her own opinion about everything.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And it's a really clever way for the narration to kind of add a little more... flair? I suppose?

CHARIS: Mmhmm

SHARON: To certain things that you know... I mean, I feel like one of the difficulties in writing a mystery must be that you always have to give some kind of backstory. In an English murder mystery there's usually an inquest, so how do you keep these things interesting? And I think the Dowager Duchess is used to great effect in sort of inserting a little more... just, fun? into the proceedings?

CHARIS: So, yeah, in a mystery novel, where you need to dump information in your reader's ears, a chatty, funny old woman is just about the best vehicle I think you can have! Because, as you know, I work in a library, and I work at the circulation desk, and I check out books to many

elderly people who are delightful. And many of them want to tell you so many things about themselves and their lives and the lives of everyone they know. And I think it's totally believable for this elderly woman to just spill the beans on everything! To, to specific people, of course. She's a lady with discretion, but she'll tell Peter!

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: And it will all come tumbling out. And I do think that there's a little bit of a hint that when she's spilling all this information, there's a little bit of a wink and a nod that she knows that she's telling him useful things, but she's pretending not to be involved in the investigation.

SHARON: Right. There's this beautiful line where Peter says something along the lines of "My mother likes to pretend that the detective side of my life doesn't exist"? Which is so patently false, because... she LOVES the fact that he's a detective, right? She loves being useful to him and yeah, doling out this information, and going to inquests. But you know, she has to kind of pretend that she doesn't.

CHARIS: Oh, I think the line is right here at the beginning of the book where Lord Peter is grinning at the telephone while she's telling him about the dead body. "The Duchess was always the greatest assistance to his hobby of criminal investigation, though she never alluded to it, and maintained a polite fiction of its non-existence."

SHARON: [chuckling] That's just so great.

CHARIS: Now there's is another important character that we've only talked about a little, which is Detective Inspector Parker.

SHARON: Yes!! Dear Charles! I love him so much.

CHARIS: Dear Charles, who does so much work.

SHARON: [laughing] So much work! Yeah, there's that bit, right--

CHARIS: Charles and Bunter are the ones doing all the heavy lifting!

SHARON: Justice for Charles!

CHARIS: Justice for Charles!

SHARON: There's, there's that part where, I think, one chapter ends with, you know, Peter sending off a telegram and saying, you know, "Charles, do you mind terribly just popping over to Surrey or wherever to do xyz," and then the very next chapter starts along the lines of "Mr. Charles Parker, in fact, *did* mind."

[both laughing]

Or, oh here it is! "It was, in fact, inconvenient for Mr. Parker to leave London."

CHARIS: Oh, dear Parker. And there's also a bit where Wimsey swans off to have lunch and leaves Parker just doing all the painstaking work, like going through Sir Reuben's papers. And then Parker is the one who goes and interviews all the tenants who live in the block of flats where the body was found, because Parker's just like, "Well, *you* won't do it, so I'd better!"

[both laughing]

SHARON: He really is set up as the foil for Peter in many ways, I think.

CHARIS: He is.

SHARON: In Chapter Five, I'm struck by how much the initial, or, or, not initial, but this description of Parker--"Mr. Parker was a bachelor, and occupied a Georgian but inconvenient flat at Number 12A Great Ormond Street, for which he paid a pound a week"--there's, there's, the attentiveness to his living quarters is really only there, I think, to contrast with Peter's new and expensive and perfect flat in Piccadilly. And he, you know, he only has the one housekeeper who--she's not even his housekeeper, his landlady who quote unquote "did for him by the day," [chuckling] sneezing into his breakfast.

CHARIS: So horrible. You know, Parker could be such a one dimensional foil for Peter, but he's given a lot more depth and I do just love him.

SHARON: Yes. He reads theology--

CHARIS: Yes!

SHARON: Like, not shallow theology, he reads, like, the hard-hitters.

CHARIS: So Parker could have been a very one dimensional foil, but I think Sayers was such an observer of people and such a student of human nature that she couldn't help rounding out her characters, even small characters. And it's [sighs] interesting the way that dovetails with her use of, you know, falling into stereotypes--

SHARON: Yes

CHARIS:--if that makes sense. That those... it seems on the one hand, every small character seems to have a life of their own, and on the other hand... yeah, on the other hand she's kind of just falling back thoughtlessly and carelessly on some unfortunate stereotypes.

SHARON: I mean... you know, not to wrap back in our conversation too much, but I guess, we do have to talk about the fact that Sir Reuben is... a... corpse. You know, in the sense of... to be fair to Sayers, she's rounding out all these characters who, you know, even the bit roles that are marginal or come across the page briefly. But yeah, there's no real opportunity to do that if the character you're stereotyping is dead. Which! I mean, there's, there's a maybe lot more we can unpack there, but I don't know if it makes me wish she'd just inserted a couple more Jewish characters that she could've given that Sayers touch to?

Or... I guess one way, if we were to read it without Sayers in mind we could say that these [descriptions] or kind of what we get about Sir Reuben... is almost never from the point of view of any kind of omniscient narrator, right? It's always reported, it's always secondhand from these other characters, who themselves might not have any other way of describing a Jewish character other than falling on stereotype. Like, there's this weird way where even as they're praising him, they're denying him any kind of interiority, right? He has to be noble and good and dedicated to his wife and never set a foot wrong, so that they will think better of him. And I think maybe as we get into, in the next episode, especially as we talk about the suspects and the whodunnit and the reveal... I don't know, maybe there's more we can do with that and kind of the contrasts that are set up there.

CHARIS: Yeah, there are some very interesting ideas there. I think even as Sayers's own anti-Semitic bias is shown in the book, that she was... like, this is the problem I run into with Sayers, where I always feel like in the places where she kind of fails, I always feel like she was reaching for something and fell short? Because she failed to acknowledge her own bias.

SHARON: Right

CHARIS: I think... and that's something I feel is gonna come up again and again, like it's gonna come up for sure in GAUDY NIGHT--

SHARON: Oh, we're gonna have so much to talk about!

CHARIS: Sooo much! Like GAUDY NIGHT is... we're gonna take so many episodes. Because we're going to be torn between like arguing about the classism and crying about punts... [sighs] It's gonna be complicated.

[SHARON laughs]

But yeah, I just, I'm always... like some time ago, you and I had a conversation about GAUDY NIGHT where I said that I thought Sayers meant to explore the classism and she just didn't quite get all the way there? And then like a couple of years later I had to go back to you and go, "So, I thought about it some more, and I realized that I was just trying to let Sayers off because I love her"--

[both laugh]

--and that really she backed down from digging into that question as much as she could have. And I think that that is the same here? Where Sayers just didn't believe that she had a bias, so that prevented her from seeing just how much she not only had it but incorporated it into her work. And it's easy to speculate about did the fact that she had a failed love affair with a Jewish man create animosity or did the fact that she wanted to marry him--'cause she wanted to marry her lover, and I would have to research this a little bit more to be sure, so listeners, don't take this as fact, but I believe that one of the reasons he gave for not wanting to marry her was because she wasn't Jewish and wouldn't convert, but she makes a point of presenting a mixed-faith household--

SHARON: Yes!

CHARIS: --in a positive light. Including, very minor spoiler for our listeners, but including the fact that in the future she does marry Freddy Arbuthnot off to Reuben Levy's daughter, and so there are mixed-faith marriages happening in the background.

SHARON: And that... it's not just that Sir Reuben was devoted to his wife, Lady Levy was devoted to him as well, so it's kind of this early example in Sayers of what is portrayed as a very equal marriage.

CHARIS: In some ways I feel like, and this is like... this is reaching a little bit, and this is probably leading a bit too much to "What was the author thinking?!" but I find myself asking to what degree was Sayers rubbing in her former lover's face, like "Look! This is what we could've had. This is the perfect marriage we could've had." But also the fact that, you know, she's written a book where terrible violence is enacted on a body similar to his, you know?

SHARON: Yeah

CHARIS: I think that's something to dig into a little bit more in the next episode, because we're skating a little close to the edge of talking about who the murderer is, but yeah. Those are questions that I have, that I don't know that it's possible to definitively answer, because I don't know that those are things that Sayers would've admitted even to herself, you know? Like, the answer to that is not gonna be in her letters.

SHARON: No. But *that* is why it's so fun to ask these questions!

So next time we'll take up some of these questions again and talk about the conclusion of the mystery, as well as some overall themes that we didn't get a chance to get to this time. And I will also be asking Charis about [dramatically] The Armchair.

CHARIS: I have feelings about The Armchair!

SHARON: I don't even know what armchair you're talking about. [CHARIS laughs] So, something to look forward to for next time!

CHARIS: Thank you so much for joining us for this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me. We'll be back in two weeks with another episode on WHOSE BODY?

SHARON: In the meantime, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram as @wimseypod, that's Wimsey spelled w i m s e y. Our website, where you can find transcripts for each episode, as well as links to any resources we mentioned on today's podcast, is asmywimseytakesme.com.

CHARIS: Our logo is by Gabi Vicioso, and our theme music was composed and recorded by Sarah Meholick. If you've enjoyed this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me, we'd be really grateful if you would give us a rating and leave us a review on iTunes or on your podcatcher of choice. [THEME MUSIC: jaunty Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint begins] We also hope that you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

Sharon: See you next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC gradually fades out]