

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 2 transcript

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

SHARON: Hello and welcome to episode 2 of As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Sharon Hsu--

CHARIS: And I'm Charis Ellison. Today we're continuing our discussion of WHOSE BODY? And a heads up to our listeners, we *will* be naming the murderer. So if you haven't read the book and want to be surprised, listen for our warning so you can turn the podcast off and come back after you've finished the novel.

SHARON: In our last episode, we covered a lot of ground: the main characters, the foundation of the mystery, the anti-Semitism, the classism, the question of who does the work, and our campaign to get justice for the *hilariously* underpaid Bunter--

CHARIS: Justice for Bunter!

SHARON: We have a lot more to talk about today, but we need to lay a foundation for some of our topics before we begin. Charis, could you give our listeners a snapshot of what London was like in 1923?

CHARIS: I'll do my best! In the wake of World War I, which ended in 1919, British society was really irrevocably changed. Nearly one million men died in the war, and many of those who returned suffered from both physical and mental trauma. What we know today as PTSD was first identified as shellshock, because it was something that nobody had a name for before thousands of men came back from the trenches with their mental health just shattered. And in 1923, when WHOSE BODY? was published, the war has been over for just four years and is still casting a really significant and dark shadow over Britain.

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

CHARIS: So Sharon, in our last episode we kind of kicked things off by talking about the Peter that we meet in the very first pages of the novel, who is compared to--[laughing]--compared to maggots, and you and I were talking about how, towards the end of chapter eight, we suddenly see a different side of Peter's character.

SHARON: Yes, and it comes... I mean, it's kicked off by sort of the different pieces of the mystery falling into place for him. So, kind of throughout the book, that question of is it one mystery or two? (I think something we forgot to mention last time is that they very rapidly come to the conclusion that the body in the bathtub was not, in fact, Sir Reuben Levy.) So we get this moment in chapter eight where sort of all the pieces of the two mysteries fall together and Peter

has a sudden realization of the whodunnit. And I won't give that away just yet, but it basically triggers a recurrence of, uh, just extreme shellshock for him.

I think what I'll do is I'll read a little bit of what happens. And it says:

"He sat down again and buried his face in his hands. He remembered quite suddenly how, years ago, he had stood before the breakfast table at Denver Castle--a small, peaky boy in blue knickers, with a thunderously beating heart. The family had not come down; there was a great silver urn with a spirit lamp under it, and an elaborate coffee-pot boiling in a glass dome. He had twitched the corner of the tablecloth--twitched it harder, and the urn moved ponderously forward and all the teaspoons rattled. He seized the tablecloth in a firm grip and pulled his hardest--he could feel now the delicate and awful thrill as the urn and the coffee machine and the whole of a Sèvres breakfast service had crashed down in one stupendous ruin--he remembered the horrified face of the butler, and the screams of a lady guest.

"A log broke across and sank into a fluff of white ash. A belated motor-lorry rumbled past the window.

"Mr. Bunter, sleeping the sleep of the true and faithful servant, was aroused in the small hours by a hoarse whisper, 'Bunter!

"Yes, my lord,' said Bunter, sitting up and switching on the light.

"Put that light out, damn you!" said the voice. 'Listen--over there--listen--can't you hear it?'"

And what's happening is that Peter's having this really horrific flashback to being in the trenches and being bombed. I think for me the first time I read this, it really snapped a lot of things into place and removes, you know, sort of the persona of Peter as the man about town and the silly detective who's sort of always spouting aphorisms. It really falls away here and we see his trauma.

CHARIS: Yeah, we've really moved on from--and we didn't talk about this very much when we were discussing the beginning of the book, but when Peter is discussing the two cases with his friend Parker, he breaks into song like *three times*, and he's just kind of jubilant and excited to have something intellectual? You know, like something challenging to do?

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: And here the reality of the responsibility of the situation has come crashing down on him. And we have this memory from his childhood, pre-war. You get this image of a child doing something just to see what would happen, and it resulting in, in catastrophe, and how that ties into his memories of the war, and that idea that the responsibility he feels--you know, he started investigating this case for the fun of it, just to see what would happen. And now he's confronting the fact that what happens is... is going to result in someone's death.

SHARON: Mmhmm. I mean, that's a theme that runs through pretty much the rest of the books, I think, um to some extent or another. Peter sort of increasingly... I mean, not even increasingly, because this is a really intense and drastic reaction, but I think as we move forward in the series, we'll also see, uh, how that responsibility just continues to affect him. And certainly this is one of the books where in some ways the murderer is quite unrepentant and awful, but later on we'll see instances where he recognizes that, you know, maybe he's ruining someone's life who was driven to murder by circumstance or is a breadwinner, I mean just all these different ways where what starts off, like you said, as a game for him has ramifications, kind of moral and ethical implications as well. Um, and I think it's just something that he continues to struggle with, but also makes him such a compelling and human character? I can't really think of many other detectives where this is even brought up.

CHARIS: There's a Tumblr post that I've seen that's just like, "The thing I love about Poirot is that he's so dramatic! He gets everyone together at the end of the book and then exposes all their secrets just because."

SHARON: [chuckling]

CHARIS: And in the context of Christie's Poirot novels, he's charming and gentle and whatever, but you like... when you think about it, you know, like exposing everyone's deepest darkest secrets before you get around to unmasking the murderer is really not... *great*.

SHARON: [laughs]

CHARIS: Potentially not the kindest thing you could've done.

SHARON: Yeah! And the whole... the depiction of Poirot as, you know, his eyes kind of light up, right? They gleam, they go green as a cat's and there's almost this like... I mean, not necessarily sick pleasure, but it... like... this is something he finds very pleasurable. And I don't know if it's that Peter's a gentleman's gentleman, but the point at which the private and the public get conflated in these mysteries is usually the moment where he starts saying, either to himself or to other people, like "I don't know if this is really the right thing for me to be doing."

CHARIS: Right. Ah, it's so hard for me to talk about WHOSE BODY? without just wanting to go straight into later books.

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: So I'm like "We can't talk about BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON right now!"

SHARON: [laughs]

CHARIS: But also when we get there, we're gonna be able to talk about how there's a beautiful symmetry between this first book in the series and the last book.

SHARON: Oh yeah, incredible, incredible symmetry. Something to look forward to, dear listeners!

CHARIS: Yes!

SHARON: Something else that interests me about this scene is how, you know, we sort of see the trauma shellshock flashback beginning, but then the narrative pulls all the way out and we don't get it from Peter's perspective? He wakes Bunter up and the narrative switches its focalization to Bunter's perspective and, and then we get the dialogue where it's made clear what Peter is experiencing. It's almost as though the book is acknowledging that this is perhaps an experience that can't quite be... conveyed?

CHARIS: Mmhmm. Well and also the fact that Peter is disassociating, right? He's disassociating from the present and from his actual environment, and the only way for the reader to understand what is happening is to see it from the outside.

SHARON: Ugh, and Bunter is just... so incredible in this scene. Just, just enters into it with him, right? Doesn't gaslight him, doesn't say "No this isn't happening." But he just, he calls Peter "'Major,' he says, 'Very good hearing, my lord, don't you fret about it,' you know, '[it's] our sappers at work in the communications trench,'" sort of bundles him off to bed. And it's interesting, 'cause at the end of the chapter, Bunter says, "'Thought we'd had the last of these attacks, been overdoing himself. Asleep?' he peered at him anxiously. An affectionate note crept into his voice, 'Bloody little fool,' said Sergeant Bunter." So even Bunter's relationship to Peter sort of gets rewritten, right? It's made very clear that they served together in the war and, and, yes, I think explains a little bit more about Bunter's loyalty to Peter and [chuckles] why he works for so little.

CHARIS: In a lot of ways, the book doesn't reference the war that much, I would say in the first half of it.

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: Then there are more references later on. We have, obviously, this kind of touches on the ramifications for Peter personally and then there are some other references to kind of the chaos that's happening in other parts of Europe, like in Russia. And it's just an interesting tonal shift from the beginning of the book to here, where it's just like, oh, there is this terrible shadow that's still lingering.

And speaking of the fact that when Peter's having this disassociative experience, and we pull away from Peter's perspective and switch to Bunter, in the next chapter, in chapter nine, we stay

out of Peter's perspective for a little bit and we're seeing things from the perspective of Parker, who's been summoned to 110 Piccadilly to find out that Peter is leaving London for a few days.

SHARON: Mmhm, so his mother comes to get him and says, "I'm going to take this silly boy down to Denver for the weekend." And you, you kind of get a sense of that apparatus that is built around Peter by his family, you know, you get the sense that this isn't the first time they've had to cope with these flashbacks. And I find it really interesting that it's... you know, they take him to the family seat? They go to Denver and kind of the next time we see Peter he's out shooting, which... is maybe a strange thing to... do? For someone who's trying to recover from having severe trauma from the war?

CHARIS: I think culturally there's a big separation between the environment of the trenches and the idea of, like, shooting in a controlled environment?

SHARON: Oh absolutely, yeah, but I think it's this interesting sort of still thematic tie-in, right? Because detection's often depicted as "the game's afoot," or "the hunt's afoot," and so forth.

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: So yeah, and what we get is really this extremely idyllic countryside scene. Peter is there with a man in a velveteen jacket, who's commanding the hounds. This is absolutely my favorite line in the book, is... the dog goes to fetch the dead bird and Peter gives it some encouragement: "Good dog," said Lord Peter." And then the next line says this: "Encouraged by this, the dog gave a sudden, ridiculous gambol and barked, its ear tossed inside-out over its head." [laughing] Which is just the *best*. I mean, anyone who's ever had a dog or loved a dog knows that whole, you know, what that's about.

CHARIS: [chuckling] Yeah.

SHARON: But yeah, I feel like there's this way in which Denver is very, very explicitly set up as the antidote to London and to what Peter's been doing. There's this line that says: "At Denver things moved in an orderly way. No one died sudden and violent deaths, except aged setters and partridges to be sure."

Again, not to get too far ahead of ourselves, what's really interesting to me is that the very next book involves a sudden and violent death, not at Denver, but at the other sort of country manor that the Duke owns--

CHARIS: Well, I don't.. the Duke doesn't own it, he rents it.

SHARON: Oh, okay.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: But sort of the idea that sudden and violent things don't really occur in these sort of pastoral settings? That are associated with hunting and kind of the, I don't know, the ancient nature of the Denver dukedom, that gets upended almost right away with the next book.

It really makes me think of one of my absolute favorite books of literary criticism, Raymond Williams' *THE COUNTRY AND THE CITY*. Where he talks about kind of the binary that's always set up in fiction between "Oh, the city is dirty and violent and messy and terrible," and then the pastoral countryside is Edenic and "if we could just get back to the rolling hills and the wonderful clean nature!" And he does this amazing thing where he's like yeah, you know, people think this juxtaposition started in maybe the Victorian novel with industrialization, but actually, if you go all the way back to Virgil, you know, you have [chuckling] Virgil saying like "Oh yes, in Rome! Things are so *bad*--"

[CHARIS giggling]

"-and if we could only just get back to shepherds and shepherdesses and things." It's just sort of this great takedown of, of how--

CHARIS: There's nothing new under the sun?

SHARON: Exactly! Exactly. And how the binary of... the city *depends* on the countryside, right? And vice versa, for its existence and its mode of being. So, yeah! Something to keep an eye on for next time, when a sudden and violent death *does* visit the country.

CHARIS: Yeah, you know, this book is fairly early on in what people think of as the Golden Age of detective fiction, right?

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: But I know that one of the things that, like, makes Agatha Christie's Miss Marple so intriguing is the fact that she's solving these terrible crimes but in a country village atmosphere, and this idea that people in country villages often have a lot of secrets.

And I know that there's--I should've looked up the title of this story before I brought this up--but there's a Sherlock Holmes story where Holmes and Watson go into the country to investigate something, and Watson comments on how idyllic all the houses and cottages look. And Holmes says something along the lines of, "There's lots of secrets in the country because they're easier to hide," because you aren't so, you know, you aren't surrounded by other people and it's a lot easier to keep your secrets.

[NOTE: Charis was thinking of 'The Adventure of the Copper Beeches' by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, first published in Strand Magazine in June 1892. The full text can be found online here: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Adventure\\_of\\_the\\_Copper\\_Beeches](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Adventure_of_the_Copper_Beeches)]

SHARON: Right

CHARIS: You know, detective fiction, mystery fiction, always kind of does that thing where it's like you weren't safe where you think that you're safe?

SHARON: Mhmm

CHARIS: Even as one of the things I love about detective fiction is that it follows these patterns and I pick up a detective novel and I feel like I know what I'm getting into? And that's one of the things that makes it enjoyable. But yeah... I didn't really have anywhere to go with that. [laughs] It's just like--

SHARON: Well, it is--I think often they're kind of maligned or miscategorized as like... *just* genre fiction, right? "Oh it's *just* a cozy mystery." But there's such a way in which books of this period, and certainly WHOSE BODY?, even though it's considered to be one of the more throat-clearing of Sayers' novels, not one of her really intense psychological studies, but they have to be so attentive to human nature and to motivation and to what makes people tick. I think that's what's often makes them so compelling, or what, for me at least, the difference between, like, a good mystery and a great one has so much more to do with everything that's happening around the mystery more so than was it Colonel Mustard in the library with the pipe [both laughing] or so forth.

CHARIS: Yeah, we care less about who did what than who felt what, and why.

SHARON: Exactly

CHARIS: And I think--I mean, you know I love genre fiction--

SHARON: As do I!

CHARIS: Yes! And so many times I think it's really unfair to malign genre fiction and I hate it when people do, because sometimes when you're working within a structure or working within expectations or working within certain tropes, those things that could be looked at as limitations turn out to create a structure where you can do really interesting things. And I just love that. I love that about genre fiction.

SHARON: Yeah, that there's a set of expectations.

CHARIS: You can both meet them and subvert them at the same time.

SHARON: Yes! So good.

CHARIS: And I love it. I love it so much. But yes, we've wandered off a little bit from our point...

SHARON: It's all right! [laughs] We can go into raptures about mystery novels.

[both laughing]

CHARIS: I'm just like, we've gotta pull it back to our notes! Though, speaking of the rules, we haven't really talked about the rules of mystery novels as Sayers thought about them. And maybe that's something that we'll talk in more detail about later, but Sayers did care a lot about the mystery being airtight.

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: And about following the rules of showing the clues to the audience. It's not one of those mysteries where you go, "Aha, it was so and so!" and there's no possible way that the reader could have figured that out.

SHARON: Right. Or even--I mean, I love a good Sherlock Holmes, but the amount of times where he's like, "Ah! Tobacco ash, I will put it in my pocket" [CHARIS laughs] and fifty pages later, "Oh Watson, I recognized right away that it was tobacco from blah blah blah" and it's just not playing fair.

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: Whereas Sayers is always *scrupulously* fair. So yeah, maybe we'll wrap back to that when we talk more about the conclusion of the mystery.

CHARIS: I'm getting ahead of us!

SHARON: [teasingly] It's because you don't want to talk about Modernism! [laughing]

CHARIS: I do! I do want to talk about Modernism. [SHARON laughing in the background]  
Sharon, please educate me about Modernism.

SHARON: Well, I'm going to do the 101 level, because we don't want this to turn into a ten hour podcast on Literary Modernism. Because then literally no one will listen to it! But yeah, I guess to kind of go back to the form of the detective novel and expectations, we were both noticing how weird the narrative of this book is? And kind of how many genres or forms it skips through, right? We have footnotes. The inquest turns into script form at certain points. I'm trying to think



what else--Oh! There's all that weird stuff with the second person that comes in as well, or sort of dipping into and out of different people's consciousnesses a lot.

And I think, on the one hand we could view this as Sayers is still learning how to write a mystery novel and she's kind of trying out a lot of different things. But I really do see it as also running alongside the experimentation with form that we associate with literary, British High Modernism. And the sort of simple way that we think about the period is that there's this turn from kind of what the Victorian novel looked like, and an increased attention to/interest in human psychology, you know, Freud and Jung. An interest in consciousness, and with that comes a kind of self-consciousness about genre and form as well, where we just start getting all kinds of experimentation.

You get stream of consciousness, there's a lot more unreliable narration, you start getting plotless novels. And of course this is--I mean, with the caveat, because I do love a good Victorian tripledecker [both laughing] and I feel like it's *very* unfair to the Victorians when people are like [in a silly voice] "Oh yeah, the Modernists were so experimental and the Victorians were so boring!" Like, Dickens does *amazing* things with form in BLEAK HOUSE. George Eliot does *amazing* things with human psychology and consciousness, so I really... I don't really actually like setting it up as such a binary?

CHARIS: So few things are, in fact, a binary.

SHARON: Exactly! It's not, with apologies to Virginia Woolf, as though human nature just suddenly changed in the year 1910 or whenever it was! [both laughing]

But, you know, a lot of that does get read through the cataclysm that was World War I. There's a very famous book by Paul Fussell from, I think the 1970s, called THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY, where he talks about how the war represented such a shift in people's perception of... even the march of history, right? That you're suddenly moving from this, uh, rationality of the Enlightenment, this idea that humanity and history and technology, everything's just progressing and getting better. And suddenly you have all that progress turned into trench warfare and mustard gas and really horrific, violent ways of waging war that no language of chivalry or order could prepare you for. So in this book he puts forth this very compelling theory that, like, language has to change alongside with that kind of fragmentation of society and culture in order to be sufficient to represent what was going on. You can't use the words honor and chivalry and... this is just not a war that you can write about in like a Tennysonian way, you have to find other ways of depicting it.

So that certainly relates to the shellshock, but I think there's this a way in which Sayers is also just doing a lot of this experimentation that usually gets associated more with the High Modernists, right? Like James Joyce being the supreme example of this. In ULYSSES you have, like, every chapter is sort of written in a different genre, so you have the theater chapter, you have the one that's like written all in newspaper headlines and so forth.

And often that's seen as something the really artistic High Modernists--i.e. dead white men [both laugh]--were doing, and then like anyone who was writing popular fiction was just, you know, not doing that. But I think WHOSE BODY? really shows that all of this experimentation was kind of just in the atmosphere and available to anyone, and certainly Sayers does a lot of that--and kind of that self-conscious, um, especially the editorializing, you know, where she even says at one point, I think, that Peter mis-remembered something or was referring to xyz, and this is done as a footnote with her initials attached rather than sort of a narrative interjection.

So yeah! That's Modernism in five minutes, folks!

[both laughing]

CHARIS: Let's talk about those two instances of second person, because I think that they're really interesting. So the first instance of this use of the second person comes at the beginning of chapter ten, after Peter has come back from his recuperative time in the country at Denver. And Parker has struck up a friendship with a medical student and brings this young man over to Peter's flat to be very subtly pumped for information. [both chuckle] And we have these couple of pages where we are seeing things in the second person perspective from this young man's perspective.

SHARON: Yes!

CHARIS: The narrative slides really smoothly from in the third person, where it's talking about this young man "with innocent eyes and a freckled face," and it slides into "Peter had a truly terrible manservant, the sort you read about in books." And then it, you know, having used that "you," it continues talking in the second person. You know, like "You wondered what the carpet had cost, upon which Parker was carelessly spilling cigar ash. Your father was an upholsterer. Mr. Pickett, of Pickett and Pickett Liverpool. And you knew enough about carpets to know you couldn't even guess at the price of this one."

SHARON: Yes, so all of a sudden that generalized "you" becomes a very specific "you."

CHARIS: Mmhmm. And a fully developed "you." And I think it's so interesting that for one thing Sayers tells us so much about this incidental, temporary character who only appears in this one scene. We get so much about him in the second person. But we're also getting this wonderful view of Peter from a completely outside perspective, you know?

SHARON: Right, and it's not... it's not a narrator's perspective. There's a very, I think, deliberate move away from that authoritative, omniscient, god-like third person narrator that suffuses the Victorian novel or even novels of the early twentieth century. And almost lampshading the fact that this is a narrative rendering of another person's perception of Peter and of Charles and of Bunter.

In some ways the detective novel being sort of the instantiation of authority, right? Someone did the killing, and someone's going to figure it out, and then the mystery's over. So to play so much within that form with concepts of perception and consciousness and the ways that people remember or mis-remember, or perceive or do not perceive... it's so fascinating that so late in the book we get this completely different picture of the characters that we think we've come to know so far.

CHARIS: Yeah. You know, by this point, we've gotten such a 360 view of Lord Peter, right? Starting from the maggots, and then seeing him have the PTSD flashback, and then seeing him at his childhood home, and now we're seeing him from an outside perspective of someone who hasn't seen him before and is making these kind of unique observations about how he's not very tall, but he didn't look undersized. "He made you feel that to be six foot three was rather vulgarly assertive." [SHARON chuckles] Yeah, I just think it's such an interesting use of that second person, you know, for just one page we slip into this different perspective and it's so fascinating to me.

And then there's a second instance of second person that happens later on in the book, much closer to the resolution of the mystery. This is in... is it chapter twelve? Yes. Chapter twelve.

SHARON: Yesss

CHARIS: And in this instance, the second person "you" is Peter.

SHARON: Mmhmm. But you don't, but again you don't know that right away!

CHARIS: Right, you're just kind of, heh, in the previous example, the second person starts a paragraph or so into the chapter. You know, it starts in the third person and then slides you into the second person. Whereas chapter twelve, you're just dumped [chuckles] into this sensory experience of being "in a vile raw fog that tears at your throat and ravages your eyes" and "you're stumbling over poor men's graves," and you're just like what's going on?!

SHARON: Yeah! [laughs] Yes, and then it goes "The feel of Parker's old trenchcoat beneath your fingers was comforting. You had felt it in worse places" which... okay, we need the fanfiction on *that* [both laughing]. Um, "You clung on now for fear you should get separated, the dim people moving in front of you were like bracken specters. 'Take care, gentleman,' said a toneless voice out of the yellow darkness, 'there's an open grave just hereabouts.'" I mean it's... this is like Dickens and Shakespeare and Joyce all rolled, I mean, I just--

CHARIS: Yeah!

SHARON: I just defy anyone to say that Sayers is not a good writer!

CHARIS: I'll fight anybody!

SHARON: Mmhmm, and there's, it almost feels like a recurrence of that kind of shellshock disassociation, right? Later on, Peter, it's still in the second person, but "You notice two Dante-esque shapes with pitchforks loomed up. 'Have you finished?' asked somebody. 'Nearly done, sir.' The demons fell to work again with the pitchforks. No--spades." So, yes, we get this really like Impressionistic view of this graveyard that they're walking through, and now rendered through Peter's perspective, but once again kind of in that remove, because... because it is in that second person voice.

CHARIS: Yeah. In this instance the second person goes on for quite a lot longer--

SHARON: Yes

CHARIS: Throughout this exhumation of a body. And you also have something that Sayers does throughout her books, is she communicates a lot of information through dialogue?

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: And this is one of those instances where you're getting a tremendous amount of information from the dialogue between the two doctors who are looking at the exhumed corpse without ever having to describe the corpse itself, you know? You just have these two colleagues who kind of have a running commentary with each other. At this point the reader hasn't been told--we're very close to the end of the book in this scene, and the reader hasn't been told who the murderer is yet. But again, Sayers is putting all the clues there on the table for the people looking for them.

SHARON: Yes. I just... it feels so suitable to... the form mirroring what the plot is doing, you know? On the one hand, there's a bit of pathetic fallacy of, okay, *of course* there's a fog [laughs], to mirror the foginess of the situation. But, I don't know, that "you" that invites the reader into putting ourselves in Peter's shoes and that the information is conveyed, because it's foggy, we're hearing the disembodied voices as he hears them and kind of putting together the information the way that he would be putting it together--

CHARIS: Mmhmm

SHARON: It feels really, I mean, both intimate to Peter's perspective? And then also just like really self-consciously constructed, I suppose. Constructed as text, or as narration.

CHARIS: Mmhmm

SHARON: So... should we... talk?... about the murderer?

[both laugh]

CHARIS: Is it time, is it time to name the murderer?

SHARON: We can't put it off forever!

CHARIS: Yeah, it's true. So, dear listeners, if you have not finished the book or if you haven't read the book before and you don't want to know, now is the time to turn the podcast off, because we're about to name names.

SHARON: Yes, so. Examine your life, examine your choices [CHARIS laughing in the background], go finish the book and then come back! We'll be waiting here for you.

CHARIS: All right, so Sharon.

SHARON: Yes.

CHARIS: We have not actually mentioned the murderer at all so far in our discussion!

SHARON: [laughing] I know! We were not playing very fair, I think.

CHARIS: That's true, we were not following the rules as Sayers, I think, would define them, because for our listeners who may not have read the book before he would be coming out of left field.

SHARON: Yes

CHARIS: But... Dr. Julian Freke!

SHARON: Yes! Freke spelled F-R-E-K-E, but, I mean, talk about a giant giveaway! [laughs]

CHARIS: Just a big arrow: this one!

SHARON: Charis, do you want to talk a bit about Freke and the role that he appears to play in the narrative at first, and then the role that we discover he actually plays?

CHARIS: Well, Julian Freke is a famous doctor, famous surgeon, who is mentioned very early on, because Sayers follows the rules. He's mentioned very early on as living in a house adjacent both to the hospital and to the row of flats where Thipps the architect lives and where the body was discovered. And so he's engaged in a minor way in the narrative from the very beginning. And he appears here and there, you know, he's at the inquest to give information about being called in to see if he could identify the body and saying he didn't know who it was.

And you know there was a theory at the very beginning that the body might have been taken from the hospital's dissecting room? And so that's how he gets pulled in.

But then you also find out that Freke was almost, sort of, not quite engaged to Lady Levy back when she was Christine Ford. That he had an understanding with her father--

SHARON: Bllllleeeuuugh

CHARIS: But-- [breaks into laughter]

SHARON: Sorry, that's what I think of *that*, but yes--

CHARIS: Yes. Which, which, good for you, Christine Ford, running off to marry someone you actually loved instead of just marrying this guy that your family liked.

SHARON: Exactly

CHARIS: And that's what Peter puts together, when he's sitting up alone at night before he has his PTSD flashback, and that's what he's looking up. He looks up Julian Freke in a WHO'S WHO volume and finds that he's a member of the Alpine Club, and that's what gives him the last piece of the puzzle. Because he realizes that whoever deposited the dead body in the bath had to be someone who could climb across the roofs.

SHARON: Mhmm, and would know how to maneuver a body into a harness and so forth.

CHARIS: And so, once he's realized that, once he realizes what the motivation is, I mean, he gets confirmation because, of course, Julian Freke writes a confession at the very end of the book...

SHARON: He just can't help himself.

CHARIS: Just can't help it! Just has to tell everyone--

SHARON: --how clever he is

CHARIS: His clever scheme. And it turns out that he had been planning to murder Reuben Levy for decades because of his hurt pride. And that's very interesting to me for a couple of reasons. You know, when we've talked a little about Sayers' personal life and how it intersects with, or potentially intersects with, her books. My personal theory is that Sayers really used her books to explore her feelings. Not so much that she based her books on her own experiences directly, but that she took whatever emotional experience she was having and turned it into fiction. And so this idea of the jilted lover, because Sayers was a jilted lover, and this idea of the jilted lover being the one who commits the murder. And it--this isn't a crime of passion, this is a carefully

planned revenge because of hurt pride. And I'm just like, "Ah, Sayers, I can see you were, you were working through some stuff there!"

SHARON: [chuckling] Oh wait til we get to STRONG POISON!

CHARIS: But yeah, not only was Sayers jilted, but the person who jilted her, that she'd wanted to marry, who said that he wasn't interested in marriage, married someone else. And not only did he marry someone else, he married another mystery writer after saying that he didn't care about mysteries. So like, you know, he disrespected her, he disrespected her profession--

SHARON: And then he married someone *in* that profession!

CHARIS: Yeah! The parts of WHOSE BODY? that talk about the rankled pride as the motive for murder, I'm just like, "Oh, that's very interesting..."

[both laughing]

SHARON: Yes. And I think, I mean going back a little bit to what we were discussing last time, you know, regarding stereotype and so forth, for much of this book, Julian Freke really is set up more as the Englishman's Englishman, right?

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: He's very deliberately written as the English alternative to Sir Reuben Levy, the man that Christine Ford's father wanted her to marry, the one who goes on and... he has a noble profession, right? He's a doctor and is interested in the human psyche and he teaches medical students, whereas Sir Reuben is "getting his hands dirty" by working on the Stock Exchange--

CHARIS: Sir Reuben Levy is a "self-made man" in a negative sense, whereas Julian Freke is a, a man of culture--

SHARON: Exactly

CHARIS:--or a man of scientific importance.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And he's, I forget where it is that he's described, but he looks very noble, right? I think it says that he has a "leonine" appearance--

CHARIS: Right

SHARON:--which, in hindsight, you're like Oh! That's the way that Sayers says he has reddish hair without saying he has red hair, because very early on there's a clue that involves red hair where it shouldn't be.

But yeah! He's really set up to be this sort of enlightened, noble, scientific man. The kind of person who in other mysteries comes in and supplies very useful information, and says, "No! The banging in the attic *isn't* occult forces, it's actually, you know, the wind entering the chimney at whatever whatever." And so I think it's definitely one of those moments where Sayers turns a trope of the genre on its head, with a man who in another book might have been the hero is actually villainous to a really, really extreme... I mean, Charis, like, exactly, the fact that it's not a crime of passion, he's just been planning and planning and waiting for the right body to show up in the morgue...

CHARIS: Staying friends with the Levys so he would have access to their lives--

SHARON: Eeeugh

CHARIS: --while planning this horrific murder.

SHARON: *Awful!* And then like showing up to try to comfort Lady Levy afterward? [CHARIS makes disapproving noises in the background] Like, it's really, really bad.

CHARIS: Yeah, it's really bad and gross. And then, but that is also like one of the clues that makes things fall in place for Peter, is that he's skimming a book that Freke wrote and comes across the line "The knowledge of good and evil is a phenomenon of the brain and is removable." And that the book describes all these things that come together in Peter's mind like "They swing together like bells in a steeple. This line is booming through the clamor: the knowledge of good and evil is a phenomenon of the brain and is removable."

So you have... Freke is like this cold, calculating bastard, and one of the things about it is that he has no sense of moral responsibility, which, I feel like that dovetails interestingly with Sayers' passion for theology?

SHARON: Hmm, say more, please.

CHARIS: [chuckles] I don't know, I didn't fully develop these thoughts, but you know, like if Sayers is projecting some of her own feelings of hurt pride onto Freke, she's also, I think, saying that Freke is capable of this horrific thing because he has no moral compass, he doesn't feel a sense of moral responsibility. Because he sees... he kind of sees morality as an aberration?

SHARON: Right, something to be surgically removed.

CHARIS: Right, and for Sayers as a theologian, there's that question of morality has to come from somewhere or a sense of responsibility to something, but there has to be some reason to be moral. And Freke hasn't found that he has a reason other than his own self-interest. And so he's like, "Well then it's perfectly reasonable for me to do what I want."



SHARON: And it's, I mean it certainly juxtaposes both with Charles, who reads a lot of theology and is sort of Peter's thought partner in this book about vocation and about his responsibilities as a detective, and of course Peter's sort of crisis of conscience when he recognizes that his detection is going to lead to unmasking a murderer and that the law is going to come for Freke.

And it's really interesting, I mean, to go back to this idea that of the many culprits in Sayers, Freke is really one of the coldest, right? I mean, I think that's correct to say. He's so boastful about why he did it and how he did it, and sort of lovingly describes how he took apart Sir Reuben's body, and then he gives the different parts to his medical students to study, right, like it's really, really awful. So for Peter to have this moment where he understands the ramifications of turning in even someone who is so grotesque and so horrific shows, I think, us as readers a great deal about Peter's moral compass and his sense of right and wrong. And that he's not really exultant at any point, you know, like "I outwitted him" or "I beat him." I feel like there's sort of a "Oh, there but for the grace of God go I" feeling on Peter's part, of being confronted with a man of maybe equal intellectual capacity and equal passion and seeing kind of through a glass darkly who *he* might become if he didn't have this moral compass or sense of good and evil.

CHARIS: Well and let's--I want to go back to that conversation he has with Parker in chapter seven. So that's going back a little bit, but Parker is having a quiet evening at home, and Peter comes to visit him, finds Parker reading theology, and what Peter has come to talk to Parker about is like, he's come to discuss the case, but what Peter *really* wants to discuss is whether he should be investigating the case at all. Because it's a hobby to him.

And Parker says, "Look here, Peter, suppose you get this playing fields of Eton complex out of your system once and for all. There doesn't seem to be any doubt that something unpleasant has happened to Sir Reuben Levy. Call it murder to strengthen the argument. Sir Reuben has been murdered. Is it a game? Is it fair to treat it as a game?" And Peter says, "That's what I'm ashamed of, it is a game to me to begin with, and then I suddenly see that somebody's going to be hurt, and I want to get out of it." And Peter is talking specifically about Milligan, the railway baron, and he's, you know, he's taken a liking to Milligan. And Peter's just like what if he *did* do it? It wouldn't be my business officially. And Parker really takes Peter to task. He says, "That's because you're thinking about your attitude. You want to be consistent. You want to look pretty. You want to swagger debonairly through a comedy of puppets or else to stalk magnificently through a tragedy of human sorrows and things, but that's childish. If you have any duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders, you must do it in any attitude that comes handy. You want to be elegant and detached? That's all right, if you find the truth out that way, but it hasn't any value in itself, you know."

SHARON: Oh, it's so good!

CHARIS: And Peter, [laughing] Peter says, "I don't think you ought to read so much theology, it has a brutalizing influence."

[both laughing]

SHARON: I mean, that burn about the playing fields of Eton--

CHARIS: Yeah

SHARON: --is truly just A-plus.

CHARIS: Yeah, because--and I do think that this is where one of the things that sets Sayers and Lord Peter as a character apart from some of the Golden Age detectives and certainly apart from some of the tropes that you see in Victorian literature--it really confronts this idea of what is your social responsibility? And it can't just be the thing that feels the best? Or the thing that seems most socially acceptable? That you have a responsibility to something more than social graces. Does that make sense?

SHARON: Yes! It does. I think that's really well said.

CHARIS: You know, this is something that will come up more in other books, it's gonna come up a *lot* in GAUDY NIGHT, but this devotion to the truth--yes, people are going to be hurt, but the truth is what is most important.

SHARON: Mmhmm. To foreshadow a bit, in GAUDY NIGHT, Harriet and Peter have this discussion, where he's talking about this book that she's kind of stuck on writing and saying you can't treat your characters like these moving chess pieces, you have to confront real human emotion, and he says something along the lines of, "Even if it hurts like hell to do it." So I feel like there's this way in which he's internalized what Parker has said to him, right? It might hurt you to do this in a way that isn't about your ego or your vanity, but if it's the right thing to do, even if it hurts like hell you have to do it.

CHARIS: Ugh, I want to talk about BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON so much, but we can't!

SHARON: [laughing] Dear listeners, this one episode will conclude our podcast! We're just gonna, you know, go right to BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON! [CHARIS laughing in the background]

CHARIS: I mean, I won't talk about how, but I think in BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON, we kind of really see this moment with Parker carried all the way through to its full fruition in Peter's worldview. This is a short scene, it's just a couple of pages, but the ripples of it go, I think, through all the other books and all the way to the end. It's also one of my favorite scenes, I just love it.

Would you, would you like to hear about The Armchair?

SHARON: Uh, yes, so *very* much, please.

CHARIS: [giggling] So, it's just a small line, but when Peter is arriving to talk to Parker, Parker is described like this: "Parker was sitting in an elderly but affectionate armchair with his feet on the mantelpiece, relaxing his mind with a modern commentary on the epistle to the Galatians." And those four words, "an elderly but affectionate armchair," I just get really stuck on that description because it's so brief and so evocative. There's very little description of the room itself, you know? But in that short description of this chair, I just have such a strong impression of what the chair is, and, like, from the chair, what the atmosphere of the whole flat is.

SHARON: Mmhmm, and you kind of know exactly who Parker is too.

CHARIS: Right! And the term "affectionate," you get the idea that Parker is so comfortable. This chair is shaped to him. You just get this impression of Parker as being secure and comfortable where he is. Which is such a contrast to Peter coming in and being restless and pacing around the flat and picking books up and looking at them and putting them down.

SHARON: No wonder Parker puts Peter in his place! [CHARIS laughing in the background] He's having such a nice evening!

CHARIS: And Peter's got to come in with all his stress!

SHARON: [laughing] Go have an existential crisis somewhere *e/se*, your lordship!

CHARIS: Yeah, but, I mean, it's one of those things that just makes me want to lie on the floor and cry, because I'll never be able to write like Sayers. Because here we have four words about an armchair. And in context, it creates so much for this scene. I feel like those four words are doing a *lot* of work. They're doing a lot of heavy lifting in this scene and in the character development, like in the sense that Parker knows who he is, he has a strong sense of identity, he has a strong sense of responsibility, and a lot of security in his place in the world. And Peter does not. And the contrast between the two of them. I just, I just think it's wonderful.

SHARON: She is really such an efficient and evocative writer.

CHARIS: Yeah! Efficient is really the word for it.

SHARON: I'm looking at this part where Peter goes to... kind of? confront Julian Freke?

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: It's sort of the confrontation where they're both talking around what they're talking about, and then that leads to Freke committing suicide at the end--

CHARIS: Well except that Freke doesn't commit suicide, he attempts it, but they catch him--

SHARON: Oh! That's right!

CHARIS: Yes

SHARON: Right, because Freke has insisted on writing this, like, very long letter about how clever he is.

[both laughing]

CHARIS: Yeah, you get that nice circular thing where the crime was committed to serve Freke's vanity, but his commitment to serving his own vanity is why he got caught alive.

SHARON: Mmhmm, but in this scene, there's this *very* electric moment, where Peter's been sort of lackadassically saying, "Oh I've been having this shellshock" and Freke is like "Oh, I can, I can give you something to pep you up!" And approaches him with this needle and then Peter sort of springs:

"He had brought up his right hand and it closed over the surgeon's wrist like a vise. The silence was like a shock. The blue eyes did not waver, they burned down steadily upon the heavy white lids below them. Then these slowly lifted, the grey eyes met the blue, coldly, steadily, and held them.

"When lovers embrace, there seems no sound in the world but their own breathing, so the two men breathed face to face."

Like... hnnnnngh. That's so good. That's just so good. I think I love that little scene almost as much as I love the dog with the one ear flipped inside out.

CHARIS: That's one of the few places, I think, in this first book, where you get a sense of how physically powerful Peter is? He actually does have intensely forceful presence when he wants to.

SHARON: Mmm, so good.

CHARIS: So, so good! You know, in our first episode we went ahead and tackled confronting the things about Sayers that are not so great. I'm just like... we might have given some people the impression that we don't like Sayers at all! [both laughing] But the truth is--

SHARON: We do!

CHARIS: The truth is that we adore her, and, you know, it's important to confront the things that are less than great about the things you adore.

SHARON: Exactly. We can love problematic things.

CHARIS: So did we have more bits and bobs we wanted to do?

SHARON: Well, you know, we did throw the question out to our Twitter followers of which character from Sayers they thought would be most likely to start a podcast, and I can read some of these to you?

CHARIS: Yes! I would love to hear them.

SHARON: @reading\_angel says, "While I don't know that he'd be particularly likely to start one, I would adore listening to Bunter's podcast about his various hobbies and useful things to know." And I think I would too! Bunter would obviously know how to get the stains out of everything, would be very useful information.

@everbethany says, "I feel that dear, sweet Parker would have a very earnest one by policemen for policemen about modern issues and methods and ethics in investigative work. His listeners would be his peers and his wife occasionally, with Peter scrubbing through to roast him later."

CHARIS: [chuckling] He would roast him! I'm just going to go ahead and mention one of my favorite lines in all the books, which is in STRONG POISON. Peter is talking to Parker, and he says, "What a perfect Victorian you are. I should like to put you in a glass case!"

SHARON: [laughing] Aww, Charles is the best.

CHARIS: I love him.

SHARON: I'll do one more even though we haven't met this character yet, but it gives us all something to look forward to. @christinamcc, I think that's correct, says, "You just know Philip Boyes would have an insufferable one to educate the masses on their obligations to artistes. Special occasional episodes on 'women, I cannot understand the attitude they take up.'"

[both laughing]

CHARIS: Philip Boyes would be a GamerGater.

SHARON: Well, [drops voice to a whisper] good thing he's dead.

CHARIS: [giggling] I guess not yet in the narrative, but he *will* be. He will be.

SHARON: That's true. Oh boy, now they're gonna come for us, Charis. And on that great note!

CHARIS: I have a question for you, Sharon, before we close.

SHARON: Oh, okay!

CHARIS: Which is, other than WHOSE BODY?, what have you been reading?

SHARON: Ooooh, yes. This is great, I get to enthuse about my friend Sarah Gailey's newest novel, which is fittingly also a mystery. It's called MAGIC FOR LIARS, and it is about what happens when a PI who is non-magical goes to investigate a murder at the magic school where her magical twin sister teaches. And it is *wonderful*. If you have ever read the Harry Potters and gone, "Well, you know, it's great that they can Transfigure teacups into gerbils, but wouldn't fifteen year olds just immediately Transfigure everything into *dicks*?" this is the book for you.

[both laughing]

What are you reading, Charis?

CHARIS: I'm reading a book called THE FOREST UNSEEN: A YEAR'S WATCH IN NATURE, by David George Haskell. And Haskell lives near like an old-growth Tennessee forest and decided to pick a meter by meter square of forest ground, and in the book he refers to it as the mandala. And he visits the mandala in the forest a couple times a week throughout the year. And A FOREST UNSEEN is kind of his journal of the things he observes just by going and being present in this forest and watching it change and transition around him. In addition to being a writer and a poet, Haskell is a biologist, and so he talks about the actual chemical processes and things like that that are happening with the plant and animal life, and discusses them in a really beautiful way. And I'm just like I'm really enjoying it. I'm reading it really slowly.

SHARON: That sounds really lovely.

CHARIS: It is really lovely! I'm really enjoying it. And then, you know, of course I'm also listening to a Terry Pratchett audiobook, because I'm always listening to a Terry Pratchett audiobook, but at the moment it's NIGHT WATCH. And you know, interestingly NIGHT WATCH also deals with some of these themes of who is responsible in society for justice, you know? I feel like Pratchett and Sayers, they're totally different genres, but I feel like they're authors who pair well in some ways. But it could just be that I really like both of them.

SHARON: [laughing] For your next podcast!

CHARIS: I'll read through all forty-something Discworld novels!

SHARON: Oh boy.

CHARIS: Thank you so much, dear listeners, for joining us for this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me. We'll be back in two weeks for our first episode on CLOUDS OF WITNESS, wherein Peter's brother, the Duke of Denver, stands accused of murrdderrrr.

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](http://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. We also hope that you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

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

Sharon: See you next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC gradually fades out]