

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 3 transcript

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

CHARIS: Hello and welcome to episode 3 of As My Wimsey Takes Me! I'm Charis Ellison--

SHARON: And I'm Sharon Hsu. Today we're recording our first episode discussing CLOUDS OF WITNESS, the second Lord Peter Wimsey mystery. And there's actually a brief scene in WHOSE BODY? that foreshadows the events in this book.

CHARIS: Yes! Gerald, Duke of Denver, complains that it's "dashed awkward having a detective in the family," and Peter says cheerfully, "'I'm bein' no end useful! You may come to want me yourself, you never know.'"

SHARON: He *does* never know! [both chuckling] I wonder if that was a later addition that Sayers put into WHOSE BODY?, since she was already writing the second book before the first book found a publisher. And, of course, as we all come to find out in CLOUDS OF WITNESS, the Duke of Denver *does* need Peter's help, because he's been accused of murdering their sister's fiancé during a hunting vacation in the countryside. And that takes us into the beginning of CLOUDS OF WITNESS--

[sound effect of a single gunshot in the distance, followed by wings fluttering and pheasants squawking]

So, Charis, let's start off just by maybe talking about the beginning of the novel and how this mystery gets set up and kind of how Peter finds out about it?

CHARIS: Yeah! Peter has been on vacation. He's taken a little trip to Corsica to get his nerves in order after he had a difficult shellshock flashback during the course of the investigation in WHOSE BODY? And for our listeners who are familiar with WHOSE BODY? or who listened to our previous episode, it will be interesting that he took that trip on the advice of Julian Freke, because while he may not trust Julian Freke in other things, he did trust his medical professionalism.

So he has been away from England. He has been completely out of contact. He has been unreachable. And he arrives back in Paris. The book describes him wallowing in bed and taking this luxurious bath and coming out of the bathroom to discover Bunter has packed up all of his suitcases. And he's like "What's going on? We were supposed to stay here?"

And Bunter's like, "Oh, well, having seen the headlines, I figured you'd want to go to Riddlesdale" and it's because there's a headline about The Riddlesdale Inquest, with the Duke of Denver arrested on murder charge.

SHARON: Yeah, it's really interesting that Peter... I mean, it's almost like he goes on this media cleanse while he's away?

CHARIS: Yeah

SHARON: The book says that for the last three months he'd "forsook letters, newspapers, and telegrams." And you really get that sense that he overtaxed himself so much that it's almost like his brain needs a reset. But good thing good old Bunter is paying attention to the world!
[chuckles]

CHARIS: I do think it's interesting just to go back a little bit to that first opening paragraph. It says that "He" -- he meaning Peter -- "had felt suddenly weary of breakfasting every morning before his view over the Green Park... the very crimes of London were over-sophisticated." WHOSE BODY? turns out to be like a really complex, even from some perspectives kind of an overdone murder.

SHARON: Right. We talked last time about the sort of psychological aspects and the sophistication of even the forms that Sayers chose, the experimentation. But yeah, even the details of the mystery themselves are a bit--

CHARIS: They're very dramatic.

SHARON: Yes! You have to suspend disbelief a little bit.

CHARIS: Right. And this is something that I don't want to get into a lot right now, because I think it's better suited to when we discuss BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON. But. There were some American detective writers, specifically Raymond Chandler [SHARON chuckles in background], who were *extremely* critical of British mysteries.

I know that Raymond Chandler wrote an essay specifically in response to BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON...

SHARON: Oh, he *hated* BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON--

CHARIS: He hated it so much!

SHARON: He was so nasty to Sayers in that essay!

CHARIS: [giggling] But yeah! He wrote this essay's that's just like "That's not how criminals work. That's not how criminals think. That's not what crime is and that's not what detective work is." Because the kind of American school of detective writing that Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and all those others were ascribing to was very much realism? And definitely lacked

this conscientiousness about form and puzzles and the rules of the mystery that Sayers and her British contemporaries were following.

SHARON: Right, which is so interesting because... I mean, so many people point to Edgar Allan Poe as kind of the progenitor of the mystery, right? With "Murder in the Rue Morgue" and "Purloined Letter" and so forth.

CHARIS: Right, and I mean like if anyone was conscientious about form and dramatics! [laughs]

SHARON: Right! It was Edgar Allan Poe, the American writer! But maybe, maybe we'll talk a bit about the seeming influences for this book in a little bit.

CHARIS: Yeah. But I do think it's interesting that you have this... I would almost say this masculine, American school of thought, where it's like "Ugh, crime doesn't make sense, solving it is this lonely activity, where you just kind of have to rely on luck and it's something that embitters you toward the human race"--

SHARON: Hmm. Do you feel like it's a... a kind of overemphasis, or I guess a different emphasis on the physicality of detection? Versus maybe British novels having more of that sense of like, oh the detective sits in an armchair and thinks about everything and then puts the puzzle together. Versus the private investigator is dashing out into the rain and hunting down clues and interviewing a bunch of people?

CHARIS: Well, I mean Peter dashes into all kinds of weather!

SHARON: Yeah--

CHARIS: As we're going to see later in this book!

SHARON: That's true, but he does make poor Charles and poor Bunter do a lot of his work as well!

CHARIS: It's true. If you think about Agatha Christie's detectives, there is quite a bit of sitting and thinking, you know? Like Poirot and Miss Marple, they just kind of sit and watch and figure everything out.

SHARON: Mmhmm, from observation.

CHARIS: I'm kind of throwing these thoughts out there, even though I really lack the expertise in American detective novels of the time period. I've read a little Dashiell Hammett, I've read a little Raymond Chandler... I've read Raymond Chandler's essay. So like these are all half-formed thoughts that are not necessarily backed up with very much research! But I do... I do think it's

interesting, especially because CLOUDS OF WITNESS is much more conventional of a mystery format than, say, WHOSE BODY? was.

SHARON: Right, we kind of wrap back to that Victorian novel or sort of early twentieth century detective novel of the locked room or the country house, right? These are very familiar settings for a murder to occur.

CHARIS: Especially the country house mystery. If you lived in England in the '20s! [Adamantly, as SHARON laughs in the background] No one could make me go to a house party! Someone's going to drop dead! I have too great a sense of self-preservation to go to anyone's country house ever!

SHARON: That's true!

CHARIS: People drop like flies!

SHARON: That brings back something we were talking about last time, about how WHOSE BODY? really had explicitly set up the countryside as, like, the retreat from the city where violent things happen, right? "No violent and sudden deaths happen in the country" and, again, I wonder how much of that was sort of a joke that Sayers inserted in the final passes of WHOSE BODY? right before it was published. But clearly here violence *does* visit the country house. And there's a sort of sense that it's... I think maybe when you were saying that this is a more traditional mystery, there's also more of a sense of those kinds of tropes or pieces, like the set pieces of a mystery being introduced more methodically?

So the book opens with an account of the inquest, and then the very next chapter we go to Riddlesdale and everyone who was there the night of the murder is sitting around the breakfast table, and the narrator sort of introduces them one by one, right? And it's sort of like, here are all the possible suspects that we know about.

Whereas in WHOSE BODY? it was just like, a body has appeared! Whose is it? We don't know! Who did it? We don't know! Who are the suspects? We don't know! There's just much more ambiguity around the entire scenario, whereas this feels very sort of like methodical and orderly.

And we get a diagram! We get our first floorplan!

CHARIS: Love a good diagram! Going back a little bit to the account of the inquest, we talked in WHOSE BODY? about how interesting that inquest account was. The account of the inquest was just so useful, so useful for conveying all this information about "Here are the facts! Just the facts, ma'am!"

SHARON: Yeah! But *not* just the facts here! There's this footnote right as Peter starts, I think, reading the newspaper? It sort of slides from the newspaper account into... once again we get

script form, and there's a little footnote that says: "This report, though substantially the same as that read by Lord Peter in the *Times*, has been corrected, amplified, and annotated from the shorthand report made at the time by Mr. Parker."

So right away we're getting a kind of lampshading that even the script account, which you would think is about reporting dialogue objectively, as it happened when it happened, the narrative immediately points out that there's a subjectivity, or a point of view, or a bias from which everything is being reported.

CHARIS: Yeah, the way the different... 'cause you get different houseguests being interviewed by the coroner, right? And [for] some of them it doesn't do script form. It gives these quick, like, summaries, and they vary in tone really interestingly.

You have a really short paragraph where Fleming the manservant is being interviewed and he's being asked who he'd taken letters to. "He doesn't remember if one of them had an Egyptian stamp. He did not collect stamps. His hobby was autographs." So it's just like "Why would I have noticed? I'm not paid to notice things."

SHARON: Which will come back later!

CHARIS: And then the next paragraph we're getting a little bit of Freddie Arbuthnot's, who's a character that we met briefly in *WHOSE BODY?*, and who's a guest at Riddlesdale. And the way that these paragraphs are gets very much Freddie's voice, even though it's not in dialogue?

SHARON: Right, it switches to a kind of free indirect discourse.

CHARIS: The way the sentence structure is. "Had certainly heard loud voices. Had heard somebody go for the stairs. Had stuck his--" You know.

SHARON: Mmhmm

CHARIS: So it's just like quick and flippant and...

SHARON: Yeah! Like, why not just render that in script form? Especially because then the very last bit of his testimony does switch back [to script form].

The feeling you get really is, I think, some of, like, that found document trope, I guess?

CHARIS: Right

SHARON: Of... some outside editor is putting together all of these notes, and the shorthand, and the newspaper account, and also sort of editorializing some of it.

CHARIS: Well then by the next page you have Mr. Pettigrew-Robinson. Like with Freddie, it's not in script form, it's not full dialogue, but the tone is different. You get a sense of Pettigrew-Robinson's personality, which is fussy and annoying and self-important. Where Freddie's account is clipped? Like it's just "Had not noticed." Whereas Mr. Pettigrew-Robinson's name is used over and over. Like "Mr. Pettigrew-Robinson did this, Mr. Pettigrew-Robinson noticed this." It's so self-important.

SHARON: Yeah, the narrative really makes clear both kind of how he really wants to be useful in the case and then kind of just what a pompous ass he is, because he *thinks* he's being so useful when he's really... not?

CHARIS: I just wanna put wet leaves down his shirt.

SHARON: [bursts out laughing, then deadpan] A fate worse than death.

[both laugh]

CHARIS: Just! Huhhhhh... just push him into a pond. But speaking of this kind of found document form that we have with the inquest account, in some ways the whole book is treated, or portrayed, as a found document, as you were pointing out, Sharon, as we were preparing our notes.

SHARON: Yeahhh, the fact that we get this subtitle? So the title is CLOUDS OF WITNESS, but on the sort of cover page there's a subtitle that reads: "The Solution of the Riddlesdale Mystery, with a Report of the Trial of the Duke of Denver before the House of Lords for Murder." So really, yeah, the entire book is kind of presenting itself almost as a report of a public event that everyone, you know, the entire reading public would've been expected to have known about or maybe read about in the paper or something.

And I think that it's really interesting that there's kind of this maybe porousness between the reality of Sayers composing these books and kind of setting them in real time, right? Like this book takes place in, I think it actually takes place in 1923 because Peter's 33--

CHARIS: Right

SHARON: Even though it was published later.

CHARIS: Right, but it's still set in 1923, so it's set in the same year as WHOSE BODY?

SHARON: Exactly. And sort of this idea that the same reading public that has just read WHOSE BODY? would also be reading this book. Almost as though Peter and the Duke are real people, and that now they're [the reading public] gonna get the truthful account of a real-life occurrence.

Yeah, and we also, I mean we have this weird epigraph from THE WALLET OF KAI-LUNG to open the book. And another really big change from WHOSE BODY? is that in this book we have both chapter titles and epigraphs for every single chapter.

CHARIS: Which is not something that Sayers did consistently, because we *just* checked [laughing] and some of her books have epigraphs at the chapter beginnings and some of them do not.

SHARON: Mmhmm, and some of them have chapter titles and no epigraphs, or just no chapter titles at all. And, you know, we'd love to come up with a grand unified theory of how she was doing all that [CHARIS giggling], but we can't!

CHARIS: Maybe it'll come to us. Or maybe one of our listeners will have a suggestion.

SHARON: Yes! There's a dissertation topic for somebody! [both chuckle] But I, I don't know, I've always, I think for a few years now I've been spinning out a theory of my own that the epigraph is somehow... it's kind of like the perfect form to narrative, or like form to thematic, or form to genre... thing? [laughing] Um, really eloquent there.

But in the sense that the epigraph so perfectly suits the detective novel, right? Because it's almost like you're given this little clue at the beginning of the book, or at the beginning of every chapter, but a lot of times you don't know how that line fits in. It doesn't really become perfectly clear *until* you've read the chapter. So, similarly to how a mystery changes once you've finished the book and reread it, I feel like epigraphs kind of do that same thing. Where their meaning really depends on the reader already knowing what the chapter that they're about to begin is about? So, I don't know, I mean, I think it both encourages rereading and they can be red herrings, they can be clues. I'm sure we'll come back to this epigraph that opens the book in our second episode once we've talked about it. And to wrap back and see how well it fits.

CHARIS: I mean, they also create atmosphere, right? And they also... for one thing, I think Sayers loved quotes and quotations? And that's a trait that she gave to Peter. And I also think that it lends intellectualism--

SHARON: Right

CHARIS: Which is something that I think Sayers, as an academic, writing mainstream fiction, I think that she deliberately interjects intellectualism and deliberately has intellectual expectations of her readers.

SHARON: Mmhmm, I think we'll especially get into this with GAUDY NIGHT, but the amounts of untranslated foreign languages, or non-English languages, that run through all the books really... it's, on the one hand, maybe Sayers having very high expectations of a, a certain kind

of educated reader, but then also, I don't know... For me, as someone who does not speak French, I find maddening at times? [laughs]

CHARIS: Just like, "Yup, gotta go Google, 'cause someone's done a translation, but I gotta go find it."

SHARON: Mmhmm, exactly. Thank goodness for Google.

CHARIS [emphatically]: Thank goodness for other Sayers readers!

SHARON [laughing]: Yes!

CHARIS: Who've done the work for us!

SHARON: Yeah! You know, people were... people were definitely much more *widely* educated in at least Latin in the England of Sayers' period.

CHARIS: The classical education was still very much a thing.

SHARON: Exactly. She could have... she could have done *us* a solid though.

Going back to the floorplan of the Lodge, that strikes me also as operating similarly to the epigraph, right? Where it's both a clue and a red herring. I mean, it also goes into the "playing it fair to the readers" aspect of giving the readers like ok yeah, this is, you don't really have the dialogue saying whose room is next to whom's, and so forth, because the reader can look at it.

CHARIS: And one thing I noticed is that the diagram points out this chest that's at the top of the stairs--

SHARON: *Mmmhmmm*

CHARIS: Which doesn't become important until you're a chapter or two in?

SHARON: Exactly

CHARIS: But it's already there on the diagram so you know where it is, you know it's coming.

SHARON: And you know that it might be important in some way.

Okay, well, Charis, we've talked a bit about... Well, we've talked *a lot* about sort of that first chapter [both laugh] and the inquest. Maybe let's move forward to that introductory chapter, so, Chapter Two, where we go to Riddlesdale Lodge, and everyone's sitting around the breakfast table. A beautiful thing that I love that the narrative does here is that everyone is angry.

Everyone is described as angry, right?

CHARIS: They're so mad.

SHARON: Yeah! So we get the Duchess of Denver. The narrative says, "She was never embarrassed. And her anger, though never permitted to be visible, made itself felt the more."

CHARIS: Mmhhh. This is the first time we're meeting Peter's sister-in-law, the Duchess of Denver--

SHARON: Yesss

CHARIS: And the description of her is sooo.... [SHARON laughs quietly in the background] She's at the breakfast table pouring out coffee and the narrative says, "This was one of her uncomfortable habits. Persons arriving late at breakfast were thereby made painfully aware aware of their sloth."

SHARON: Yeah, and then the next line is "She was a long-necked, long-backed woman, who disciplined her hair *and her children*" [emphasis Sharon's].

CHARIS: Yes! You're just like Oh!

SHARON: I know exactly who she is! I mean, poor Helen. I actually found myself feeling for her a bit more this go-around. Like, nobody in that family takes her seriously. Everyone treats her a bit as a joke, because she's extremely unpleasant. But I kind of wonder, you know, chicken or the egg on that one. But she's really like the [chuckling] Maris Crane of the Denver family.

CHARIS: Yeah, but you know the narrative kind of takes us around the table and we meet all of the other guests at the Lodge. And it's interesting because we have several married couples. And all the marriages are different. There's the marriage between the Duke and the Duchess, which is...

SHARON: Strained?

CHARIS: Yeah, it is... it is dutiful but not affectionate. It was very obviously kind of a marriage of class convenience. I don't know if it's mentioned in this book, but we know from elsewhere in the books that they were cousins. I mean, I guess, still are cousins, but they've conscientiously married each other because they were the right class, right family. So, I mean... that's their marriage!

And then you have Colonel and Mrs. Marchbanks, who... they have this lovely description where "They had nothing beautiful about them but a solid mutual affection." [SHARON murmurs appreciatively in the background] They just seem like this charming, middle-aged couple. They

understand one another. And they are a real contrast to Mr. and Mrs. Pettigrew-Robinson, who are... not people I would want to have as neighbors?

SHARON: Or houseguests.

CHARIS: Or houseguests. Or relatives.

SHARON: But they also! I mean, it's interesting because the Pettigrew-Robinsons are well-suited, in that they are both incredibly unpleasant and sort of busybodies.

CHARIS: Right, they're both fussy, they're both interfering. They're both like... conscientiously moral? Mrs. Pettigrew-Robinson is described as being not only angry, but outraged, because she thinks "it's *wrong* to let your mind *dwell* on anything not really nice." And so she has something that's not really nice shoved in her face because of these events, so she's just mad to be in this situation. And then she has her husband who is angry because no one is treating him as if he is important.

SHARON: Right, and they really, I mean, the narrative points out how this anger spills over into what they think of the Denver family, right? Mrs. Pettigrew-Robinson, because Lady Mary had kind of spurned her help, she thinks to herself, "She had never liked Lady Mary. She considered her a very objectionable specimen of the modern independent young woman." And that really sort of picks up on that hurt pride theme--

CHARIS: Yeaah

SHARON: --from WHOSE BODY? that when someone's pride is hurt, they can react with a sort of suppressed rage, right?

CHARIS: Right. There's a... how many marriages are we on now, three?

SHARON: Three

CHARIS: That's three marriages. And then there's a fourth marriage, which we aren't introduced to by the way, that's a little farther along in the book, but the farmer and his wife.

SHARON: The Grimethorpes. Terrible marriage, abusive and really awful.

CHARIS: So you have just this spectrum of marriages.

SHARON: Mhmm, well, and also Lady Mary's potential marriage to Denis Cathcart, right? So the set up of this book is that Lady Mary, Peter's sister, has engaged herself to this young man, Denis Cathcart. And you very quickly find out that it's not really a love marriage. It's two young people who were very fed up with being told by their guardians what to do. And so they find in

each other a kind of, what they call a mutual understanding. Where it's like we'll both get to do exactly what we want, there's sort of this implication that we're going to sleep with other people, but we'll be independent. We'll have Lady Mary's money. We're going to go off and live in Europe.

CHARIS: And probably live separately.

SHARON: Yeah!

CHARIS: It's a marriage of convenience in order to have autonomy.

SHARON: And independence, exactly. And so this scheme, of course, is interrupted by the fact that Denis Cathcart turns up dead at 3AM, and that's the murder that the Duke is accused of committing. But yeah, I think there's a reason that the novel points out all the shapes and forms that a marriage can take.

And I think it really again harkens back to the Victorian marriage plot novel, right? Where from even the Regency period, starting from Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, the novel of the nineteenth century is really concerned with the question of what makes a good marriage. And often that's sort of a metaphor for the union of these three countries that make up Great Britain, and that's kind of why you see the marriage plot novel falling apart as the century goes on.

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: You move from Jane Austen and sort of these lovely, happy marriages to people in George Eliot and Henry James marrying the wrong person. I feel like there's a very similar thing going on in this book about the novel sort of presenting a bunch of unhappy marriages and sort of giving Lady Mary maybe a second chance to think about what she's gonna want in a union. And certainly this becomes a live question for Peter later on in the series. What kind of person is he going to marry? And what will that mean for him?

CHARIS: We see marriages with power imbalances?

SHARON: Yes

CHARIS: Or even, not just marriages, but as we'll see when we get a little bit farther, just relationships with power imbalances. Obviously the Grimethorpes' is a marriage with a huge power imbalance, with just really unfortunate consequences for the woman. With the Duke and Duchess, there's an emotional power imbalance, because you get the impression that Helen is the one controlling the household, and Gerald is not portrayed as having a deep emotional life of his own.

SHARON: Right. But also he holds a different kind of power. It's not like Helen can leave him. She'd lose her children--

CHARIS: Right

SHARON: --she'd lose her livelihood. So it's like the best that they can do is, you know, spend some time apart. He goes off hunting and she stays at Denver.

CHARIS: Right, which I don't think the narrative suggests at all that either of them have the inclination to dissolve their marriage. But I think to them this is what they think marriage is. As far as they're concerned, they have a perfectly normal marriage, despite the fact that it includes peccadilloes on the part of the male half. But I imagine not at all on the female half.

SHARON: Exactly.

CHARIS: Because of course not. But then you have the Marchbanks who, you know at one point in the book the narrative is just reminding us where everyone is. And you get one of my favorite lines in the book, which is that "Mrs. Pettigrew-Robinson had taken her husband for a brisk walk" [both laughing], which, so I'm like "That's how *that* relationship is, I guess!" But it says that the Marchbanks "were somewhere upstairs, experiencing a perfect union of minds" or something like that? And that's the marriage in this book that is obviously loving and functional and affectionate and... it just goes to show that Sayers, in this book and I think all of her future books, is really showing that a good marriage is one with equality.

SHARON: Mmhmm, right. Equality of power, equality of intellect, equality of respect.

CHARIS: And, not to spoil things that will happen in future books, but we are going to see how if there is something that creates unequal power, then maybe do something to equalize things. And that's what leads to marital happiness.

SHARON: Mmhmm. That's a *very* good preview that doesn't give anything away, Charis! [both laughing] Well done, well done!

CHARIS: Thank you, I try!

SHARON: Have we said what we wanted about marriage, before I take us back somewhere else?

CHARIS: I think so. I think that those were all the moles I wanted to whack.

SHARON: Mmm. To go back to the breakfast table scene, there is one final character who shows up at the very end of that pan around the table. And it's someone we've met before, but--

CHARIS: Oh, oh yeah! We haven't talked about it yet!

SHARON: No!

CHARIS: [laughing] Just been maundering on about all these other people.

SHARON: [chuckling] Yeah. But the narrative comes to rest on "the presence of the detective, a quiet young man in a tweed suit, eating curry at one end of the table next to Mr. Murbles, the solicitor." Sidenote, I *love* Mr. Murbles' name. And I also love Sir Impey Biggs, the lawyer that shows up later. Anyway, just Sayers at her most Dickensian naming, I think!

CHARIS: I know! [laughing] If you ever get, like, a little, a little dog [SHARON gasps in the background and whispers "Yesss!"] with like a squashed-in face, and you don't name him Mr. Murbles, I will be sad.

SHARON: You can disown me forever [CHARIS laughs], because that is perfect. Okay, now that we've chased that rabbit hole [both laughing], but okay, the detective is described as "a quiet young man in a tweed suit," and it is not until... one, two... three pages? later that we find out that is, in fact, Mr. Charles Parker, our dear friend from last time.

CHARIS: Dear Charles!

SHARON: Yeah! And there's this really funny way in which the narrative points out... Mrs. Pettigrew-Robinson says something kind of very ungracious about detectives, and Parker sort of suddenly speaks up about, you know, detectives have an ungrateful task. And the narrative says, "He had said nothing for a very long time, and everybody jumped." And I *love* that, because it's really the dialogue and the scene and the action is mirroring the thing that the narrative itself did, right? Which is sort of like pan over, mention a young man, you don't find out until a bit later that it's Parker, and then everybody, including the narrator, forgets about him for a little bit, and then he pops back in, sort of making this like dry comment that embarrasses those who have ignored him.

But it, to me it really parallels how the narrative I think, not just in this book, but in other books [as well], kind of always treats the servants?

CHARIS: Mmm

SHARON: So often in Sayers you don't realize a servant is in the room until partway through a scene where somebody's like... like later on, Peter has written a few letters, and then he says, "Here you go, Fleming," and you're like "Oh!"

CHARIS: "Oh, Fleming! You were here!"

SHARON: Yeah! Fleming was here! And, and, you know, this only works in book form, right? If it's a movie, then you just see the servants in the background all the time. But I kind of love how Sayers kind of plays with that.

CHARIS: Because that is, that's just like a fundamental element, I feel, like of the Victorian novel where there's just this assumption that servants are around and you don't have to mention them. And that leads into the '20s and '30s, if you're in a certain type of setting, you can assume servants are around, even if they aren't mentioned.

SHARON: Right!

CHARIS: And I think Sayers very deliberately plays on that assumption, and then-- surprise!

SHARON: They were here this whole time! Yeah, and it'll certainly come to bear later on in this book, but also in a couple future books, where... kinda once again, right, where we were saying last time, this idea that servants are the people who are always around and know your most private self and have access to your most private self. But also, they have that access because everyone that they serve is kind of trained to ignore them? Or treat them like pieces of furniture or like people who don't have interiority or like kind of a life of their own. And I think it's interesting that this trope really starts to gather steam in this book, because the Socialists that Mary falls in with are kind of caricatures of Socialists, but this whole idea of who is the worker, and who's doing the labor.

And we get this great scene where Bunter's talking to one of the housemaids, and you really get her perspective on the family. And it's not very flattering! You know, there's a lot of class resentment and, I think, rightful complaining about how careless these people are about the feelings of the workers who are making their lives possible.

CHARIS: Well, especially Lady Mary, who is being... a very dramatic and difficult person. Which, I mean, on the one hand, okay, your fiancé just died, you're entitled to a little, a little bit of fuss, but on the other hand...

SHARON: Right, like your brother is in jail, standing trial for murder, and you take to your room and refuse to talk to anybody, and refuse to give the evidence that might exonerate him. And the scene where Bunter is talking to her maid Ellen, Ellen says, "It's very nice to be a ladyship, and all your tempers coddled and called nervous prostration. I know I was dreadfully cut up about poor Bert, my young man what was killed in the war--nearly cried my eyes out, I did; but, law! Mr. Bunter, I'd be ashamed to go on so!" Like, ah, what a terrible experience she's had! And here's Mary--

CHARIS: And well, like, just that implication that well-to-do people are allowed to be deeply emotional.

SHARON: Mmm, and nobody else is. It's also, I think it's picking up on... I think Lady Mary is really, really modeled after Rachel Verinder, from THE MOONSTONE?

CHARIS: Mm, which I haven't read...

SHARON: [gasps] Whaaaaaat?

CHARIS: I haven't read it.

SHARON: [aghast] Hooooow? [both giggling]

CHARIS: I've read the WOMAN IN WHITE, but I haven't... it's on my, it's on my to-read.

SHARON: Okay, so I guess I should explain a bit what I mean by that, to you and to our readers, er, listeners!

So, THE MOONSTONE, by Wilkie Collins, was kind of a late-Victorian mystery novel told all in letters. So again, that kind of found document set trope. And in it, there's no murder, but the title object, the Moonstone, is this precious gem that gets bequeathed to a young Englishwoman on her eighteenth birthday. And then that night it disappears. And there's a really horrible Orientalist subplot that goes along with, like, why it's a cursed object and these people from the, heh, [sarcastically] the mysterious East who are coming to get it back, which I'm not going to get into. Because, again, not a podcast about deconstructing terrible racist tropes--

CHARIS: For our *next* podcast!

SHARON: For our next podcast! [laughs] But, in the book, the young woman who owns the Moonstone, her name is Rachel Verinder. And she does this thing, too, where she takes to her room and refuses to speak to anybody about what she saw that night or what she didn't see. Refuses to talk to the police, goes into hysterics. And later on, not to spoil it, it comes out in the open that she did this because she thought the man she was engaged to, whom she loved, stole the Moonstone. So it's out of this misguided attempt to protect him, even though she breaks off the engagement. But yeah, it's because she, she thinks she's protecting his reputation.

So yeah, I just think given how much Sayers is reaching into that country house mystery, and the fact that she respected Wilkie Collins as a mystery writer so much, I really feel like she's picking up on that with Mary. But also really showing kind of how irresponsible that stance is? And how much it not only inconveniences the investigation, but is... you know, I think going back to that conversation we had about Charles and Peter discussing doing the right thing, no matter what it would cost emotionally, Mary in this book is, at first, too immature to do that.

CHARIS: Right. Well, the call-out that Peter gets from Parker, Parker reminds him that he's not in a story, he's not... you know, it's not about his attitude, that what's important isn't how he's presented.

SHARON: Right

CHARIS: And... I really feel like, we learn a bit about Mary's past in the course of the investigation, 'cause Peter has to learn about his own sister, because they weren't close.

SHARON: Well, neither close in age, nor--

CHARIS: Yeah, they're not close in age, and then he went off to the war, and then he was recovering from shellshock. So, I think he says between one thing and another, I know very little about my own sister.

So as we learn about Mary, we learn that she has really been trying on different hats.

SHARON: Mmhmm, different personas?

CHARIS: Yeah, and that's very much, you know, a young adult thing to do. And my impression of Mary is that, like her brother Peter, she's an emotional, creative person. And what that's meant for her is that she's been trying on different personas and seeing herself as a figure in a narrative.

SHARON: Right! Like Peter says, later on, he's like, "She's been reading too many sensation novels." He very deliberately calls out the narrative that she's trying to place herself within.

CHARIS: There's just this long list of things that she's been. Like narrative where she was a heroic nurse. There's the narrative where she's a brave Socialist. There's a narrative where she's a very modern woman who's entering this marriage of convenience, a very Continental relationship.

SHARON: And! We'll find out, later on, that there's also a narrative in which she is a romantic heroine and elopes.

CHARIS: Right. And we get to the midpoint of the book, and she comes to London to see Peter and ends up seeing Parker instead. And she is very conscientiously the brave, sacrificial martyr for someone that she cares about.

SHARON: And Parker hilariously sees through it right away. I mean, I don't think it's giving away too much to say that she, in that halfway point she comes to him and says, "I shot Denis Cathcart myself, you have to let Gerald go!" And Parker's immediately like, no of course you didn't. Don't be ridiculous.

CHARIS: But I also! You know, I... that chapter, which is, that's chapter 7?

SHARON: Um, 8.

CHARIS: Chapter... chapters 7 and 8. I also, I love the fact that, I think it's safe to say now that Parker and Mary, we ship it?

SHARON: Oh so much!

CHARIS: [giggling] We ship it so much!

SHARON: So does the book! I mean-- [laughs]

CHARIS: Oh yeah, but you know, Parker is hearing her make this absolutely ludicrous confession, and poor Parker is just head over heels for her.

SHARON: Oh he *loves* her already!

CHARIS: He loves her so! And, like, he admires her. Like he thinks that she's being really brave.

SHARON: And gallant! I mean, listen to how -- this is from his point of view -- how the narrative describes the way that she shows up at the door: "the door opened -- exactly as in the beginning of a Sherlock Holmes story -- to admit a tall and beautiful young woman, in an extreme state of nervous agitation, with a halo of golden hair, violet-blue eyes, and disordered apparel all complete; for as she threw back her heavy travelling-coat he observed that she wore evening dress, with light green silk stockings and heavy brogue shoes thickly covered with mud."

Like, it's this wonderful thing where she comes in as this beautiful damsel in distress -- and I love that the narrative sort of, like, takes the air out of the balloon a little like "And her feet were in thick boots and covered with lots of mud"! -- but like, that's how he sees her! It's really lovely.

CHARIS: It is! It's so nice! It's like, get you someone who looks at you the way Parker looks at Lady Mary.

SHARON: Mmmm, truly.

CHARIS: But then I also, like, isn't there... I'm flipping through, 'cause I should have written down the page number, but I didn't, 'cause I'm bad at taking notes, but isn't there a part where Mary very deliberately starts crying and Bunter swoops in with smelling salts?

SHARON: [laughing] Yes!

CHARIS: Really, really interferes with her dramatic moment!

SHARON: He puts it under her nose and she goes, "How *dare* you, Bunter! Go away at once!" [both laughing] Bunter is the best. He just has no time for hysterics. Other than Peter's. I guess lots of time for Peter's hysterics, but he's like, "Ah, gosh darn it, I can't take care of all the Wimseys!"

CHARIS: Right? Which, in Parker's defense, he's not so blinded by Lady Mary that he thinks that her, the hysterics that she goes into are, are genuine grief. Because he does point out to himself like "If it *is* crying. It sounds like hiccups." And *he* calls in Bunter. So.

SHARON: Where were we, before we went off into our raptures?

CHARIS: We were talking about how Mary creates this narrative around herself and that's... it's just kind of showing that, you know, she's younger than Peter, she's less mature, and she hasn't had... you know, she's been surrounded by other people who've been creating narratives around themselves, right? She hasn't had a level-headed friend like Parker to be like, you know--

SHARON: Get it together!

CHARIS: Yeah, get it together, your ego's not what's most important.

SHARON: Well, and I think there's also something to be said here, maybe, about just the different avenues of expression that are available to men and women?

CHARIS: Yeah, that's very true.

SHARON: In this time. Because Mary and Peter come from the same family. In some ways, their position is closer even than Peter's the Duke's, right? Because neither of them are gonna inherit, but they have this wealth, they have this privilege. Neither of them are ever gonna be expected to work. And so it's like, what do you do with yourself if you're artistic and temperamental and you want to leave an impression on the world? Well, Peter gets to go and detect and have sort of this public life.

CHARIS: Right, and, well, Peter has control of his own fortune because he's a man. Whereas Mary has absolutely nothing unless her oldest brother gives it to her.

SHARON: Mhmm, and he's not going to until she gets married, in which case it goes to her husband.

CHARIS: Right, and it has to be a husband he approves of.

SHARON: Exactly, yeah.

CHARIS: Which is why she was going to marry Cathcart.

SHARON: Right. Which is really awful.

CHARIS: You know, if she had succeeded in eloping with her Bolshevik--

SHARON: With Mr. Goyles [laughing]--

CHARIS: With Mr. Goyles, the unfortunately named Goyles--

SHARON: So bad!

CHARIS: So terrible. But you know, like, if she'd married him, she wasn't going to get, you know--

SHARON: A cent, yeah.

CHARIS: Yeah, Gerald would've had the power to withhold her inheritance. Which, kudos to Lady Mary that she was prepared to go through with that, even though she very clearly didn't fully understand--

SHARON: What that might mean, right. And I think the book does... the narrator is very sympathetic to her in that regard, right?

CHARIS: Mmhmm

SHARON: Of, she really would've been backed into a corner either way. It was, the choice was marry a man you don't love and have some amount of independence and be given the wealth that your brothers just get to have, or marry someone that you do love or you think you love and have nothing. And even though the narrative I think sort of pokes fun at Mary and her friends, you know, her sort of aristocratic set for, like, play-acting Socialism--

CHARIS: Yeah, like, what did you... what did you call them?

SHARON: Uh, champagne Socialists?

CHARIS: [laughs] Yes, champagne Socialists, I love it.

SHARON: [mutters] I've known so many. [CHARIS chuckles in the background] Um, but, you know! There is this aspect of, she doesn't quite understand what that would truly mean, right?

Her friend Miss Tarrant is like, "Oh yes! Once we, you know, the group of us went down and rented a farm and we tried to live on a few shillings a week and it was great, great larks!" because they only did it for two weeks.

CHARIS: Yeah, they're just like "Oh, it was such hard work but we loved it!"

SHARON: Yeah!

CHARIS: "We loved working hard for, for two weeks."

SHARON: Exactly. And there's a, you know, the ungracious part of me is like, "Mmm, I wonder how many servants they took with them!" Right? Like, how many servants that just got elided out of *that* narrative as well.

Which is funny, 'cause Sayers herself was quite critical of late-stage capitalism and kind of what she saw around her in terms of mass market consumerism. So I don't think that she herself was entirely, I don't think she's writing this book going, "Oh, I'm going to show up, you know, those damn Socialists" or anything. But I think she is pointing out a kind of way in which Mary engages in this particular pose because it is an attempt to be more free than her particular social class, or her upbringing, or her family situation was setting her up for. Right?

Like, something that really strikes me is that in the Socialist club that Peter goes to when he's looking for Goyles, he overhears people talking about D.H. Lawrence and Dada and Joyce. And it's, like, I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but I feel like this is one of the few moments in the series where Sayers has characters refer to art and literature of that present moment. Sort of those experimental Modernists. So it's interesting to me that it's the Socialists who are really in the know about what's going on in the artistic world around them.

CHARIS: Yeah, like in *STRONG POISON* we get a bit of a caricature of those artists. Peter is taken to a couple of salons, where he [chucking]--

SHARON: Oh that's right, yeah.

CHARIS: Where he meets some very dramatic and interesting people. But those aren't really references, I don't believe, to any actual living artists. Those are caricatures of, I think, people in the London art scene that Sayers would have encountered. So yeah, I think this is one of the few references to the actual Modernists.

SHARON: Mmhmm, right. And, just a sidenote, but *ULYSSES* was serialized in the years preceding, but the actual novel in its entirety was published in 1922. I think it's interesting to see Mr. Joyce just sort of offhandedly mentioned in here.

CHARIS: So what have we not covered... You know, we haven't talked very much about the actual investigation! We haven't, we haven't talked about Peter very much! [laughing]

SHARON: Oh let's! Yes, we should! I noticed, because we had talked about the extremely appealing and flattering comparison of Peter to maggots in cheese [both laughing] in the last book, I don't know that he gets much better showing in CLOUDS OF WITNESS! There's this description of him when he and Charles are looking at the scene of the crime, um, and we can discuss that a bit more in a bit. But it says, "Lord Peter gazed down sadly. Muffled in an overcoat and a thick grey scarf, he looked, with his long, narrow face, like a melancholy adjutant stork." Which, I just love! Once again, okay, it, it is better than the cheese and the maggots, but I, I think the picture of him as the melancholy stork is really so evocative and gives you such a sense of the whole atmosphere and how he's feeling in this particular scenario.

And I don't know... do you feel like he's less of the silly ass in this book? I mean, he still pulls on the persona a lot.

CHARIS: Right. He's still.... You know, he's throwing out quotations. He's making silly comments. In this bit where Parker's showing him the bloodstains and footprints et cetera that are in the grounds of the Lodge, and Peter is being very. He's just enjoying himself perhaps a little too much.

SHARON: But he does say later, I think to Parker, "Don't, don't think that this is easy for me."

CHARIS: Right. I think something that is established in WHOSE BODY? but maybe isn't said explicitly is that this silly ass persona is a way of emotionally distancing himself. And WHOSE BODY? was in many ways very emotionally intense for Peter. And he's gone away for this, I think he was gone for what, three months? In Corsica, having this intense restful time. And he immediately comes back to this mystery. And we don't see him having an emotional break in the course of this book. Sayers really kind of steps back from engaging with that, but that doesn't mean that Peter lacks depth as a character, it just means that it's more subtle.

SHARON: I wonder if part of that is that he is aware, because he is defending his brother, that he has to keep a sterner check on those emotions.

CHARIS: I think that's something that, we'll probably pick up that thread again in the next episode, 'cause we're going to dig more into some of the things that happen to Peter in the second half of the book in the course of his investigation and some of the interesting conversations that he has with his sister about the things that are going on and what they mean.

SHARON: Yeah, I feel like in the first half, he and Parker almost share the narrative? And then as we move into the back end of the novel we get much more Peter.

CHARIS: Something that occurred to me as I was reading this -- obviously I've read CLOUDS OF WITNESS innumerable times -- but something that occurred to me for the first time on this reread is that this is the closest we get to seeing what a novel with Parker as the protagonist would look like. Because we get so much of his perspective!

SHARON: Yeah, more so than WHOSE BODY? and any of the later books, I think you're definitely right on that.

CHARIS: There's many places where Peter is off doing something else and Parker is the one carrying the narrative. And so I asked myself what would that look like, a book that was about Parker, without Peter in it--

SHARON: Maybe--

CHARIS: Well, I have a theory!

SHARON: Please share!

CHARIS: I think the closest example that I can think of is Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn.

SHARON: [slowly] I have not read any Ngaio Marsh. [chuckling] Now I have to confess.

CHARIS: Sooo, your assignment [both laughing] is to read a couple of Ngaio Marsh and tell me if you think Inspector Alleyn reminds you of Parker. Now that I've, like, preloaded you with a bias. [SHARON laughs] And I'll read THE MOONSTONE.

SHARON: Okay, excellent. I like how this fun little project of ours is just like, all of a sudden we have reading lists.

CHARIS: [giggling] We'll do a podcast! It'll be fun! It will be low effort! Just a fun little hobby!

SHARON: Yes, just a fun little hobby we squeeze in in the margins of our time, you know, no problem.

CHARIS: [sternly] Now you have homework.

SHARON: Oh, but, dear listeners, Charis and I were both nerds and adored homework, so. [giggling]

CHARIS: Why was that in the past tense?! [SHARON laughs] I'm very excited to write my fifty-page essay on--

SHARON: On THE MOONSTONE? Okay good.

[both laughing]

SHARON: Oooh, okay, bring it back. Um, I mean, I think this actually wraps back nicely to our observation that CLOUDS OF WITNESS much more resembles a Victorian mystery, right? Because if it is a mystery in which Mr. Parker is the protagonist, then of course it would look very much like a Victorian novel. Parker that dear Victorian that Peter wants to put under glass, right? And we'll, I think we'll talk more next time about just how much this book owes to THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES.

CHARIS: Of course, we have not gotten to the moors yet!

SHARON: No.

CHARIS: And we haven't gotten to, well [chuckles], maybe I shouldn't throw that out there. We haven't gotten to the part that's gonna make me want to break into song.

SHARON: [intrigued] Oh?

CHARIS: I mean, I probably won't, out of respect for our listeners...

SHARON: Or... you could...

CHARIS: Or maybe I won't... But there is a song, the lyrics are quoted in the book, and it was just one of the things where I'm just like, I don't know what this song is. So I looked it up and it has *many* verses and... [quietly] I learned them all.

SHARON: [laughing] Our next episode is just you singing all the verses.

CHARIS: Yeah, just half an hour of me singing all the verses of "Ilkla Moor Baht'at," which is a song about why you should not go out upon the moor without a hat. That's it, that's the song.

SHARON: Good warning.

CHARIS: Spoiler! The reason is because you'll die!

SHARON: *Peter* should have paid more attention to that song!

CHARIS: He really should have. He really should have.

SHARON: Truly.

CHARIS: He's a very soft city boy who forgot about weather.

SHARON: Mmmhmm, that the moors just always want to kill you.

CHARIS: Whether or not they have giant hounds in them.

SHARON: But that's the Chekhov's gun of Victorian country house mysteries, right? If there is a moor in Act I, in Act III it will try to kill you!

CHARIS: Uh... yeah... that's true.

SHARON: Sorry, listeners. A little... slightly, slight spoiler. Or just a little preview for next time.

CHARIS: Just a teaser, a little teaser.

SHARON: Yeah. Um, was there anything else we wanted to say about the mystery itself? I feel like we never quite get there. [laughs] We just go rambling off in other directions.

CHARIS: I think obviously we're making the assumption that the majority of our listeners have probably read the book. For those who may not have, we haven't spoiled anything for the second half of the book. But the mechanics of the mystery, you and I were talking before we hit record, we were talking about how in some ways, this is a much more mainstream, much more classic mystery set up than what we have in WHOSE BODY? And narratively it might seem less complex or less experimental than WHOSE BODY? is, but it's also really airtight as a mystery. The clues are really airtight. It's still very self-consciously -- how many times have I said self-consciously, in the course of this recording? A drinking game for our listeners. I feel like I've said it a bunch. But it's self-consciously complex without being--

SHARON: Tortured?

CHARIS: Yeah, and without being an incredibly complex and improbable mystery the way that WHOSE BODY? kinda is. Like, WHOSE BODY? is only plausible because it's a revenge fantasy. Because otherwise that's a very stupid way to murder someone. [SHARON laughs] Whereas CLOUDS OF WITNESS, you know, that's kind of what the title references, I think, right? It's a Biblical reference to--

SHARON: The Book of Hebrews.

CHARIS: Right, "a great cloud of witnesses." But, kind of like all the quotes at the beginnings of the chapters, it's taken out of context to mean something slightly different than what it means in its original context. The cloud of witness that we have in this book is... too many people, with too much evidence, and too many clues...

SHARON: That contradict each other, occluding the truth.

CHARIS: Yes. Ah, such a good word, such a good five dollar word there. [SHARON chuckles] You get a bonus point on your homework for your vocabulary.

SHARON: Thank you.

CHARIS: Gold star.

SHARON: Aww, I feel like I'm back in Latin class! [both laugh] But I think it works both ways, though, I think the reference or the context still does make sense. Because if I'm not mistaken, the original Biblical reference, if I'm not mistaken, the writer of Hebrews, when talking about this great cloud of witness, is describing a kind of lineage of faith or belief, kind of stretching from Adam to Jesus. And name-checks these "greats" when it comes to the begats.

And I think, I don't know, given everything we've been saying about how much this novel is also self-consciously and deliberately picking up tropes of Victorian country house mysteries, and Sayers is kind of name-checking Wilkie Collins and name-checking Arthur Conan Doyle and so forth... I also see the name as a wink and a nod toward Sayers saying Peter Wimsey is going to take his place in the line of great detectives, from Dupin, through Sherlock Holmes, et cetera, up to now. So sort of locating the book and her project within this, this much larger literary canon.

So yeah, it works on multiple levels, which pleases me. Or at least I'm going to make it work on multiple levels, so. And *that* is literary criticism! [CHARIS laughs in background] Just make it work!

CHARIS: I mean, I also find it one hundred percent reasonable to think that Sayers intended it to work on all those levels, because Sayers with her, her ties to academia and Sayers with her interest in theology and Biblical commentary and... Like, I find it hard to believe that *none* of that is bobbing around in her mind.

SHARON: Mmhmm. It's also just a really good title.

CHARIS: I mean, it is! It's a good solid title.

Thank you so much for joining us for this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me! Join us again in two weeks for our second episode on CLOUDS OF WITNESS, where we're going to discuss the solution of the case.

SHARON: And also why you should never go walking on the moors.

CHARIS: Don't go walking on the moors.

SHARON: Just, never. Don't do it. Don't do it. [CHARIS giggles in the background]

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. 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: jaunty, Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint, gradually fading out]