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 this special episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Charis Ellison--

**SHARON:** And I'm Sharon Hsu. Charis, we have a different kind of episode today. Would you tell our dear listeners what makes this one a bit different?

**CHARIS:** Yes, we are thrilled and delighted to be welcoming our first guest to the podcast. And today we're going to take a little break from our regular episodes working our way through the novels of Dorothy L. Sayers, and we're going to do something outside of our normal posting schedule to celebrate a new book that we are very excited about, THE MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY: HOW DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND HER OXFORD CIRCLE REMADE THE WORLD FOR WOMEN.

**SHARON:** Yes, we have historian Mo Moulton on with us, and we had this lovely conversation with them about THE MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY, and Modernism, and Sayers and her circle of friends that often kind of get left out of the record of her life as both collaborators and influences. So let's get into the interview, and then afterward Charis and I will be back for some thoughts about how supportive friendships have played a role in our own personal, creative and intellectual lives.

[A snippet of theme music]

**CHARIS:** We are so delighted to have our very first guest on the podcast. Mo Moulton is currently a senior lecturer in the history department at the University of Birmingham. They earned their PhD in history from Brown University in 2010, and taught in the History and Literature Program at Harvard University for six years. Their previous book, IRELAND AND THE IRISH IN INTERWAR ENGLAND, was named a 2014 Book of the Year by History Today and was the runner up for the Royal History Society's 2015 Whitfield Prize for the first book in British or Irish history. Moulton regularly writes for outlets such as The Atlantic, Public Books, Disclaimer Magazine, and The Toast.

**SHARON:** In 1912, Dorothy L. Sayers and five friends founded a writing group at Somerville College, Oxford. They called themselves the Mutual Admiration Society. Smart, bold, and funny, these women were also sheltered and chaperoned, barred from receiving degrees despite taking classes and passing exams. But within a few short years, World War I rapidly expanded the rights and opportunities available to women. Then, in October 1920, members of the MAS returned to Oxford to receive full degrees, part of the first group of women to have this honor. In their new book, THE MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY: HOW DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND HER OXFORD CIRCLE REMADE THE WORLD FOR WOMEN, historian Mo Moulton follows

these six women as they navigate the complexities of adulthood, work, intimacy, and sex in interwar England. Excluded in many ways from the higher echelons of the British establishment, they turned their talents to popular culture, instead producing a body of work that argued for a simple but radical idea: that women were first and foremost human beings with the same complexity, diversity, and possibility as anyone else.

**SHARON:** Mo, we are so excited to have you here with us. We'd love to hear a little bit in your own words about this project. Could you start with just how you came to be interested in Sayers and the MAS, and what inspired you to take on this group biography?

**MO:** Yeah, absolutely. And thank you for inviting me to be on. I was so delighted when I saw this this podcast coming into into being right now, it is absolutely thrilling. So I think--I looked at the first couple of episodes of this podcast, and I think I actually came to Dorothy L. Sayers in a similar way as both of you, which was through GAUDY NIGHT. And in my case, I heard somebody speaking about Sayers and about her novels and about GAUDY NIGHT and I thought, well, you know, probably I should read this novel. This seems maybe good airplane reading on the way home or something. And instead I was totally blown away by it. The density of description and the sort of world of scholarly intellectual female community that she creates. And reading it, the question that came to me was, you know, who were these women in real life? It was so clear to me that this wasn't just a work of imagination, that these were real people. These were, these were textured people with their own motivations and complexities. And so I started reading up on Sayers and and reading into her life and trying to find the answer to that question, basically.

And what I found was that a lot of the existing biographies, I think--I think of Sayers biographies as divided into kind of biographies that take her really, really seriously, sometimes veering into the hagiographical and sometimes not, and biographies that are really almost salaciously obsessed with the men in her life, and who created Peter Wimsey really? Or what was the influence of this this lover or, or her husband, or her son, you know, sort of imagining her as a as a mother, as a girlfriend, as a wife, and not thinking about all these cool women. And so that was how I started. And I thought, you know, how much can I actually find out about these other women who were in this writing group that she was part of, the Mutual Admiration Society. And the answer turned out to be a ton, like they all wrote a lot. They wrote really funny letters to each other throughout their entire lives. So that's how it turned into a group biography really, was the realization I had that not only had she created GAUDY NIGHT out of a real community, but that that community was rich and fascinating and, and actually accessible to historians.

**SHARON:** Could you give us a brief rundown of the other members of the MAS?

**MO:** Sure. Absolutely. So I focus, in MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY the book, I sort of focus on, on four core people.

So Dorothy L. Sayers. Her really close friend, Muriel St. Clare Byrne, who came to Somerville College, Oxford, a little bit later than the rest of them, but became Sayers' really, really close friend. She was a historian, she focused on Elizabethan theatre and kind of everyday life. And yeah, also had a really complex and fascinating love life that, that happily she preserved in letters as well. Then there's Charis Frankenburg, Charis Barnett Frankenburg. She was Barnett when she first came to Somerville. She became a birth control advocate and a parenting advice writer, basically, as well as, she was a trained midwife. She was involved in what historians often describe as kind of the professionalization of motherhood in this time period. So sort of an advocate for rights for women in that way. And then the fourth of the core group is Dorothy Rowe, and she came from Bournemouth, a seaside resort town,  south of England, and she lived her whole life there. She was a beloved English teacher in a town there. And she was also the founder and one of the main directors of an amateur theatre company that did all sorts of sort of experimental work throughout the early 20th century. That's kind of the core, the core gang.

And then there are two more who I'll mention: Amphilis Middlemore and Muriel Jaeger. Amphilis Middlemore was also an English teacher. She moved to Pennsylvania and taught at Bryn Mawr. And Muriel Jaeger was also a writer very, very close to Dorothy L. Sayers in the early 1920s. And then she sort of moves, moves out of the orbit of the group for, for reasons we could discuss, I don't know. She was also a novelist and actually one of her novels has just been reissued by the British Library. She wrote one of the very early dystopian science fiction novels in 1926.

**SHARON:** Well, I think we'll get into their engagement with mass culture and popular genres in a bit. Yeah, I was so fascinated when I was reading the book, especially with Charis Frankenburg, because I'd never heard of her before. And I think going back to what you were saying about the sort of split biographies of Sayers, they sometimes--they mention that she was part of the MAS, but not really going into these friendships.

And it really struck me how I think a lot of times when we study literary Modernism, we talk a lot about the Pound circle and the Hogarth Press and kind of these little magazines and these--these networks of writers who were all not only influencing each other, but, you know, publishing each other and editing each other. And it really struck me that the MAS is one such network and it feels like a shame that often these other women kind of get left out of the story of Sayers' life. So would you, would you mind telling us a bit about, I mean, I think it's safe to say that Lord Peter Wimsey would not exist as we know him without some very key members of the MAS. So I'd love to hear from you more about that.

**MO:** Yeah, absolutely. It's sort of an open secret, right? Because Dorothy L. Sayers thanks Muriel Jaeger at the beginning of WHSOE BODY? It's dedicated to her. So Muriel Jaeger's nickname was Jim. It says "To Jim," you know, "he would not a staggered into existence without you." And I think it is, she means, she means a bunch of things by that. Muriel Jaeger was really key in being a sounding board and, and a friend for Sayers in the early 1920s. Sayers had gone

to France to work in a school in this kind of sort of ill-fated romantic, or attempted romantic connection. And it didn't--it all went badly very quickly.

And while Sayers was there, she asked--she was writing a lot to Jaeger and she asked Jaeger to send her pulp fiction, basically, and they got into writing stories about a sort of faux analysis of Sexton Blake, who was this like ridiculous, long-running pulp detective hero. And what I think is interesting--I think a few things are interesting about that. One is certainly that it shows both Jaeger and Sayers really taking seriously, like, what does it mean if you take the tools of literary analysis and turn them towards something that is regarded as complete trash. And that, in fact, there's something really useful about that. It reveals something about popular culture and connections between popular culture and high culture.

But more to your question, I think in this, it sort of shows the way the Mutual Admiration Society created space for each other to take on different personalities, to be different people, to try things out without fear of being ridiculed or dismissed right away. And so in this kind of faux analysis of Sexton Blake, Sayers says, well, I'm going to call myself Alexander Mitchingham, because that sounds like a good professor of comparative religion kind of name. And I think that that sort of thing, that they're clearly playing a game, but they're also allowing each other to inhabit kind of riskier intellectual or artistic positions. And I think that that becomes crucial for Sayers to be able to write this book that is a real departure from the kind of scholarly training that she's undertaken.

**SHARON:** And then BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON was co-written as a play with Muriel St. Clare Byrne initially, correct? Even before Sayers wrote GAUDY NIGHT.

**MO:** Yeah. Yeah. So it's sort of interesting. My opinion is that Sayers introduces Harriet Vane into the series around the time that she kind of rekindles her friendship with Muriel St. Clare Byrne. So I think that--I think that those are not unrelated facts. I think that she kind of is able to have a more serious friendship and a more serious intellectual companionship with Byrne at the same time that she's kind of ready to delve more deeply into emotions and stuff in her writing. So, you know, Vane gets introduced. And then there's this question of like, well, are they, is anything going to happen between, between Wimsey and Vane? I don't want to spoil anything, you know, for future readers, but, you know, there's a series of novels where we sort of know that Harriet Vane exists and that Lord Peter Wimsey is, is interested in her and proposes marriage I think every year on her birthday and on April Fool's Day.

But it kind of stalls and it's really in conversation with Muriel St. Clare Byrne and with her partner, Marjorie Barber, that Sayers kind of finds her way out of that impasse and finds a way to write about Wimsey's emotional and romantic dimensions in a convincing way. So, yeah, so Byrne had been... Byrne was a playwright, among other things. She was trying to become a playwright and somebody had approached her about whether she'd be interested in doing an adaptation play, you know, stage adaptation of Sayers' story. And she turned that down. And then she said to Sayers herself, Look, why don't we write a collaboration? Why don't we

collaborate on a play using your characters? We'll write it jointly. And they spent a weekend together, basically, and dreamt up BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON, worked out the plot and and set to writing it.

And yeah, it was absolutely a 50/50 collaboration. It's kind of moving. The drafts are in the archives at Wheaton College in Illinois. And it's true that you can actually see their handwriting going back and forth and, you know, Muriel's handwriting crossing out some things. And then, and then Sayers writing like, don't you, don't you think we need more about motive over here? And so they're really in the, in the weeds, I guess, working out the details of of this play and also working out what it's going to say, how they're going to balance this play that is both about--it's a murder mystery, but it's also about how to have an egalitarian marriage, basically. And Sayers is really clear that she relies on Byrne to kind of tell her if it's working on an emotional level.

**SHARON:** That strikes me as so incredibly generous and I think speaks a lot to the trust between them, right? To take this character that Sayers was famous for at this point and to allow her friend or invite her friend to play in the same sandbox as it were.

**MO:** Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Yes, she is. So Sayers starts writing GAUDY NIGHT after the draft of the play of BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON is finished and Muriel St. Clare Byrne was actually not that convinced by the early drafts of GAUDY NIGHT. She thought it got off with a slow start. I mean, to be fair, it does. A slow start I happen to love! But [SHARON, muffled: But a slow start nonetheless] yeah! So I think there is a kind of a moment where, where Sayers sort of says, well, you know, I'm taking my toys back now, like I'm going to write GAUDY NIGHT the way I want to write it.

So yeah, I think it's complex. But also, yeah, it is, it is really generous and I think made writing about those characters and made reaching that kind of narrative resolution that she reaches probably much more possible for her.

**CHARIS:** Well, I do think, you know, like GAUDY NIGHT is such a shift from the earlier books. And I always kind of think of there's a moment in GAUDY NIGHT when Harriet Vane is talking about her writing with Peter Wimsey, and he kind of takes her to task, like if you're going to write about real people, you have to deal with feelings. And just like... that came from somewhere, like Sayers had that conversation with somebody.

**MO:** Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. There's all sorts of speculation about who the real, the real Lord Peter Wimsey is. And especially in some of the older biographies, you know, various, various of Sayers', um, you know, boyfriends or male companions are auditioned for that role pretty unconvincingly. And in MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY, I don't--I try not to make this case too strongly, but I sort of like the thought experiment of thinking through Muriel St. Clare Byrne as one of the role models for Lord Peter Wimsey and indeed her partner Marjorie Barber as a role model for Harriet Vane. And that kind of somebody who's very, very intelligent, very quick, but also has a kind of emotional center and is able to speak emotional truth. Yeah, I think

there's something, there's something there. Yeah, I think you're right. That conversation was transcribed from somewhere.

**CHARIS:** But yeah, one of the things that was striking me when I was looking at the book, like even just right in the introduction, you talk about how kind of, if the members of the MAS had been men, they wouldn't have been very interesting, because in a lot of ways they would have been fairly conventional. The fact that they had something to react against that made them so interesting and I was really interested in the ways that the MAS really differentiated themselves from the feminist movement that was around them at the time, including sometimes not identifying as feminists and talked a little bit about the ways that they gave each other space to like try out different roles. And that included kind of experimenting with like gender representation and taking on, you know, more masculine roles. And so I would love to hear you talk a little bit about that. Obviously, in the book, you do a wonderful job of not assigning 21st century like names or values to that. But I also feel like it kind of reflects a lot of conversations that I see happening now. And so I'm just kind of wondering, like how you see those relationships and that experimentation in that time period and also kind of how you see that relating to maybe current conversations.

**MO:** And there's so many interesting directions I feel like I could go at with the question. So I guess one thing to say is that I think, I think it's important to recognize that their, their lives operate in the precondition of the success of first wave feminism, you know, like they are direct beneficiaries of all of this advocacy to... that Somerville College exists, that they're able to attend, that they're able to rent rooms that they can have their own key to. Like all of that is because of, because of first wave feminism. I don't think that any of them, maybe Sayers like on a particularly cranky day, but I don't think any of them would have, would deny that they didn't necessarily see themselves as feminist activists. So I think that I think that that's an important distinction, although in lots of ways I think Charis Frankenburg gets the closest to actually being a feminist activist. Certainly she changed the lives of a lot of women who were able to access things like birth control at a low cost.

But I mean, it was one thing that strikes me as having a connection to today's conversations and really all the conversations about feminism that have been happening over the last century and a half. I think that the members of the Mutual Admiration Society were really interested in thinking about feminism as equality. I think, you know, they were... when they, when they were differentiating themselves from the feminists around them, it was often because they were reacting against a really common kind of feminism, in the '20s and '30s, that really emphasized difference and that emphasized the special contribution that women as women had to make to public life. And I think, I mean, I think those conversations are still happening today when people are talking about whether, I don't know, Margaret Thatcher or Condoleezza Rice can be a feminist, right? And is it a feminist thing for a woman to hold power if she's continuing to enact racist or classist or or indeed misogynist policies? And I think Sayers and Byrne especially would have been very clear that the version of feminism that they were interested in was about sort of saying, well, women are equally complex, equally human, equally able to come up with

appalling or redemptive policies or actions. So yeah I see them as kind of situating themselves carefully in that way.

**SHARON:** I think also a lot of the debates around even allowing women to be granted degrees from Oxford and Cambridge really informed that for, for Sayers and her set, right? Because there were, there were so many sort of public writings about, oh, well, you know, if women get a university education, it will suit them so well to be wives and mothers. And I know Sayers in particular in ARE WOMEN HUMAN? talks about, fairly disapprovingly I think, about, you know, other students around her who, in trying to prove that they belonged at Oxford would get into the sorts of scrapes that men would. But it, it reflected more poorly on the women's colleges. So if you stayed out past your curfew or you were caught smoking and things like that, she really didn't like that the students had to kind of uphold the reputation of all women. But she also understood, like you said, that they, they had to thread that needle so carefully.

**MO:** Yes. Frankenburg talks about this pressure to be "purer than pure" is how she puts it. And she compares her experience at Oxford with her experience running the birth control clinic later. That they have to be so careful to say we're only, we're only treating married women. We're only treating women who have already had a child. We're certainly not giving any advice to sex workers, right? It may well be that none of those things are true, but they have to be so careful to maintain that reputation. She says that the pressure to be purer than pure in that context was like the pressure to be just sort of completely above reproach in order to prove... in order to not give ammunition, really, to people who wanted to remove women from Oxford University and to not expand their sort of equality there.

So, yeah. So, I mean, I guess this is the other part of your question, Charis, was about the, you know, the diversity of genders and relationships and, and sexual ways of being that the members of the Mutual Admiration Society kind of had and experienced. And I wanted to be careful, too, to think about what it was each of these women were actually saying about about their own lives and what they chose to keep... how they how they spoke about each other and to think about their... kind of the way that, the ways that their actions amount to meaning. I mean, none of them alas, none of them ever said, you know, I understand myself as this or like even, even the ones who lived until the 1980s never sort of say, well, now that gay liberation has happened, I am X, you know. No, they did not. They did not say that. Which is interesting. I think there are interesting questions to be asked about, about why and why not.

But what was, what became obvious to me was the ways that through their letters, through their wills, they were using the tools available to them to construct kind of alternative forms of kinship, I think, or kin-like ties with, with each other. And they were operating as though as, though those ties were meaningful and important. So I guess the thing that I wanted to say about the question about, like, 21st century values and should we think of, of Sayers in particular, like... how does, how does knowing that she was good friends with Byrne and with, and with her partner, Marjorie Barber, like how does that change how we understand her? I think it's a complicated question, both because of, of the sorts of things that she wrote. But also, I think it's really clear that it

wasn't merely that she sort of accepted that Muriel St. Clare Byrne had these entanglements and she didn't look too closely, right? She was really a part of Muriel and Marjorie's life. She spent Christmases with them. I mean, she had her cat write letters to "Auntie Purr" and "Auntie Mew," right? This is, this was a really close friendship. When Muriel St. Clare Byrne was involved with another woman, Sayers was a really close confidante for Marjorie Barber and, and their letters are... it's clear that they're talking about these relationships and how Marjorie is navigating it and so on. So her actions suggest that she really sees this as, these these relationships as valid and this household as kind of a second home for herself. Really, these are some of the most important people to her.

How to square that with the other things that we know about Dorothy L. Sayers, that officially she's, she told somebody, you know, early in her life that "inverts," you know, using the language of the time for homosexuality, "inverts make my skin creep," right? She said things like this. And she was obviously also very, very serious about Christianity, about theology. And I suppose one thing that I think is important to keep in mind is that maybe thinking about it in terms of progressive versus not progressive isn't quite the right framework. I think that she she understood herself as somebody who had, who had done things that were regarded as sinful by, by her church. And she married a man who was divorced. She couldn't marry him in the church. She had sex out of, out of marriage. She had a baby out of marriage. She used birth control. I mean, she did all sorts of things.

And I think something that's interesting in her writings in the 1940's, is she makes the argument repeatedly that the discussion of morality and discussion of sin has become too focused on sex, and that there's lots of ways to be immoral that have nothing to do with sex. That, you know, greed and hatred are examples that she uses. And so I think that much as I didn't want to impose labels on Muriel St. Clare Byrne or any of her partners, I also don't want to recover Dorothy L. Sayers, as you know, some kind of like proto-gay rights activist, because there's no evidence that she thought that. But there is evidence that these relationships were really important to her. And I think that she was thinking in interesting and kind of expansive ways about both the way that everybody fails and inevitably fails to live up to any abstract code of morality. So she may have seen herself as equal to Muriel in other words, in that way, but also that maybe, you know, what people are doing when they have sex isn't the most important issue of morality to deal with.

**CHARIS:** Yeah, one of the things that I think has been, that has shaped me the most, like as a reader of Sayers from the time I was in my mid-teens, has been kind of absorbing this idea of essential personhood before any other label. And it's multiple times we see Sayers fall short of that in using classist and racist stereotypes sometimes. But the fact that the idea was there at all was really important to me as a young evangelical person suddenly absorbing new ideas.

**SHARON:** I think it's, I mean, Charis and I have talked a lot so far and we will continue to talk a lot about these contradictions in Sayers and the ways that her, you know, sometimes her biases got the better of her. But she... I think that's what makes her so fascinating to read, is you can,

you can see her really to varying degrees of success, trying out those ideas about essential personhood. And I think the ways that she's contradictory really to me speak to a lot of the contradictions of Modernism. And you bring this up in the book, too, right? That the Modernist experiment was so invested in kind of bridging high and low culture, or that members of the MAS felt they had this responsibility to take what they learned at Oxford and kind of bring it into the popular realm, even taking the way that they'd been trained as literary scholars and reading pulp fiction and so forth. And so there's, on that, on the one hand, that very... that impulse towards democratizing knowledge and art. And then on the other hand, you know, I don't know that it's going too far to say Modernism, at least as a literary movement, was sort of created by elites who were very unconscious of their elitism. And in a lot of ways, and I think, I don't know, I, I found myself also wondering if that, that sort of taking something that is considered academic or high and bringing it to a larger audience, if in any way you see your project as being situated within that, because, you know, you obviously, you did a lot of archival work. Sayers' papers I think now have been published more broadly, but a lot of the archive that you looked at, it's still you know, it's held in universities. And I know that you yourself have done a lot of public intellectual work, thinking especially about your writings for The Toast and so forth.

I don't know if there was a question in that... I think I seem to have talked myself in a circle! But yeah, I guess I'm curious, you know, if you, if you feel like social media or, you know, this, this era of the Internet is particularly helpful for that?

**MO:** Yeah. I mean, I think one of the things that was really clear to me while writing the book was the way that a lot of the things that we're talking about today about social media and the Internet were things that, that Sayers and her friends were talking about as well. It's really clear that over the course of the late '20s and early 1930s, Sayers starts having qualms about writing to manipulate, and she's making a living, in addition to writing the Wimsey novels, as an advertising copywriter. And she starts thinking hard about what does it mean to be writing things that are meant to induce a particular kind of confusion or a particular kind of desire for something you don't need. And whether, what are the kind of moral implications of that? That becomes an important question for her even writing detective fiction, you know, and having these tricks so that you can place all the evidence that the reader needs to realize who did it, but you're kind of preventing them from looking at the evidence. Is that the best way to write, you know? What, what do the kind of... how, how far do you go with that, in misleading people, really? So I think it's, to me, it's interesting that she's thinking about those kinds of things and thinking about it in the context of how does that relate to issues of democracy and sort of mass culture. And in a way, that's, those are the same conversations we're having now about fake news and about the use of the media and the use of misleading advertising, which is a very historian answer to say, no, no, they thought of it then too! But so I think to me it was important to write this book in a way that would make some of these stories available to to a broader audience.

I think that the fact that I was able to write this in a way that isn't a purely academic book is something I'm very grateful for, because I think that it chimes so much with their project. And

there's a kind of resonance between what I'm trying to do and what they were trying to do that I, that I appreciate having the opportunity to do. I think that something that often gets repeated when people are talking about, both about women's history and about queer history is about kind of the lack of sources. And this is something my students often say to me, you know, I got, I want to write about the history of sexuality. I want to write about the history of, of, you know, lesbians or trans people or working class women. And there aren't the sources. And to some extent, that's true. But I think it's also the case that there are a lot of, there's a lot of information that's been preserved in various ways. And the issue is an issue of access, really. And so for me, it was really important to be able to look at some of these archives that are not, they're not heavily used. They're not always really accessible, particularly in the context of sort of cuts to local government and funding and all that. But they are there. I mean, these women wrote to each other, they read about their lives, they kept their diaries. They even kept folders that said things like "to burn later," right? And they didn't burn them. So they, they're there. And so I guess my, my sort of manifesto for the book, I guess, is wanting to sort of say, yeah, these sources are there and we can talk about a broader range of people than the kind of canonical few that we often talk about.

**SHARON:** I think you really accomplish that. I was so grateful to learn more about these women and to hear from them in their own words. I think they really gave us a gift in not burning all the letters that they were asked to. Is there anything that you were hoping someone would ask you in, in this tour or about the book or about your process?

**MO:** Well, we've touched on the edges of this a few times, so I want to come clean and say that my favorite is Charis Frankenburg. And yes, she was kind of the, my slow-emerging favorite in a way. And I think that with Sayers being the famous one of the group and then, and then with Muriel St. Clare Byrne being the queer one and having all kinds of interesting opportunities to think about queer history there--and I loved both of them. I sort of love them all in their own ways. But yeah, I think one of my, my secret ambitions for the book is that people will come for the Dorothy L Sayers and then sort of stick around for the Charis Frankenburg. Yeah, she's, she's the committee person who who shows up in a community and says, okay, well, let's fix a problem together. I'll start a committee and then we'll start a group. And then she turns up every week and does it. And I think maybe most most of all, I think she's somebody who you see really grappling with her, with issues of race and class, not always in ways that I fully agree with or indeed agree with at all. But I think she's self-reflective in a way that is really rare and special and interesting.

**SHARON:** Yeah, and she was so funny, too. I found myself drawing like little smiley faces and little hearts around, you know, some of the things that she said that, that you report in the book.

**MO:** Yeah. I mean, the book was a pleasure to research for that reason. Definitely. I'd be, I'd be in an archive all morning and then step out at lunch and like desperately texting my friends, being like can you believe what she said!

**CHARIS:** Mo, thank you so much for joining us. It has been just an absolute delight to talk to you and to hear about your project and the Mutual Admiration Society. It's coming out very soon. Would you tell our listeners a little bit about where they can find you online, where they can find out more about the book and where they can see you as you go on your book tour?

**MO:** Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So the book is out in the US on November 5th and in the UK on November 7th. See, in terms of finding me, I am on Twitter with a very silly handle of @hammock_tussock. And the story behind that is a story for another podcast. And I also, I also have a website, just the much more soberly named momoulton.com. And yeah, I will be doing some events about the book. I will be in Boston and in New York City and in Toronto and in Washington, D.C. in the middle of November. And all the kind of dates for those events are on my website And then I'll be doing some events in the U.K. as well. So I will be in Oxford and in London right at the start of December, as well as hopefully some talks, some literary festivals in the spring. So, so stay tuned. Yeah, coming, coming soon to a bookstore near you. Hopefully.

**CHARIS:** And we'll definitely put links to all those things on our show notes as well.

[snippet of theme music]

**SHARON:** Charis, I so enjoyed our conversation with Mo and was so grateful to get a chance to read the book early and learn about these other women in the MAS and their part in Sayers' life.

**CHARIS:** Yeah, it was like, one of the wonderful thing about this book, which I think that so many of our listeners are going to enjoy, is that it's written in a way that makes it accessible to everyone. You know, like whether you have a really scholarly background or really scholarly interest in these women, there's a lot to draw from it. But it's also very readable for everyone who just has, you know, an everyday interest in Sayers or, you know, a layperson's interest in history without, you know, without looking to write 20 page papers on the subjects. This is a wonderful scholarly book that's also very readable for everyone.

**SHARON:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think gives a lot of context, kind of that missing piece, right, that Mo was talking about, where the biographies on Sayers really often only just touch on these other these other friendships. So it's just such a treat to get to read about this group of really incredible women who occupied such a, like, a key moment in history where so much of society was changing. And I think it really adds to Sayers' biography I think in important ways,.

**CHARIS:** You know, we talked a little bit so far in our early episodes about kind of the, the way that Sayers drew from her own life and used her books to maybe explore things that she was feeling and also to do kind of little thought experiments about, you know, like what if you didn't have a sense of moral responsibility and you--[SHARON laughing: Just a small thought experiment]--just a small thought experiment about what if someone didn't believe that morality was a real thing? What kind of stuff would they be capable of? Just, you know, just a minor thing she threw in there. But, you know, but also so many small things from conversations that her

characters have about truth. And what does that mean, and what does it mean to be socially responsible, and what's the place of educated women in society, and all these things that make her books complex and nuanced and interesting far beyond the mysteries themselves. And, you know, looking at this new book and seeing the way that, you know, it's really obvious that the women in her life who were kind of her intellectual partners and her intellectual kind of springboard contributed so much to just thinking through all those questions so that they appear on the page.

**SHARON:** Yeah, I think it really, it really puts paid to that idea that, you know, artists are these solitary geniuses.

**CHARIS:** Yeah.

**SHARON:** Like hole themselves up and their garrets and write and, you know, don't need people and don't need community. I think, I think this book is.. one thing I really enjoyed about it as well, it's just, it's such a celebration of found family, right? Of chosen family and of how friendships can be just as important in people's lives and just as significant as romantic relationships or familial relationships. I know that we were, you and I, you know, in sort of preparing to record this episode, and as we were reading it, it really gave us a chance to kind of reflect on our friendship and how important that's been in both of our lives.

**CHARIS:** Yeah. And, you know, it's not just the two of us. Like we're the two people doing this podcast. But, you know, we have a circle of people that we all kind of grew up together. And --

**SHARON:** Quite literally!

**CHARIS:** Yeah, quite literally since most of us met on the Internet as teenagers..

**SHARON:** In the like Dark Ages of the Internet. I guess that's a historical misnomer, Dark Ages. But anyway.

**CHARIS:** The medievalists are going to come for you. Yeah.

**SHARON:** Do you want to tell the good people a bit about Readerville?

**CHARIS:** Well, I mean, speaking of R.I.P The Toast, R.I.P Readerville. But you know, Readerville was a book-focused internet forum that existed far back in the distant past. And we joined it... I mean, I was 13.

**SHARON:** I think I was, I was... I was probably 15 or so when I came on a couple of years after you did, I believe?

**CHARIS:** Yeah. And, you know, there was just a handful of us teenage girls on this forum that was mostly populated with adults. And the wonderful thing about that community was that the adults who did interact with us treated us with intellectual respect. You know, they took us seriously and like, you know, in retrospect, like that was so meaningful that my opinion on books was being taken seriously. And I, you know, I was being encouraged to think critically about the things that I was reading and to think analytically, even though, like, you know, we've touched on how much we love genre fiction. And we even talked a little bit with Mo about how, you know, Sayers and the other members of the Mutual Admiration Society kind of grappled with bringing a scholarly thought process to like mass media and genre fiction. And I feel like on Readerville we were all encouraged to do the same. You know, a lot of us were reading young adult fantasy, but we were kind of encouraged to think about it more deeply.

**SHARON:** Absolutely.

**CHARIS:** Yeah. I'm just like that, that really shaped me as a reader. And I mean, like, I am now 33 and like still, still thinking about that. And that was something that was set up by that community.

**SHARON:** Yeah. I think I always describe Readerville to people as like the best way to grow up on the Internet because it was such a safe place to for us to explore. And I think, I mean, I remember making, you know, really horrifying blunders at times.

**CHARIS:** I certainly did.

**SHARON:** Yeah. And not getting slapped down. But, you know, having an adult sort of gently be like, hey, that's not really cool, what you just said, because of these reasons. And I mean, that was extremely formative for me, too, just as a human being, you know, much less a reader. Yeah. And I think, you know, not not that we're drawing a direct line between ourselves and the MAS but that group of sort, of young teenage girls among us, we, we sort of had a similar story. Like when we went to college. We all kept in touch and that was--I forget exactly when Readerville shut down. I think it was still around when we were--

**CHARIS:** It was, I think it was at some point during like... I was still in college when, when Readerville closed its doors, which was an extremely sad day.

**SHARON:** There were many tears. Yes. But we, we had also this, this group of us had, I think, you know, we had like Livejournals, but we've just, we've just tried like every single Internet technology there.

**CHARIS:** And we wrote letters.

**SHARON:** We did write letters!

**CHARIS:** Wrote actual snail mail to each other.

**SHARON:** Yes. And I hope none of those are burned, even though maybe some of them should be.

**CHARIS:** In the attic somewhere, I have letters saved.

**SHARON:** Yeah, and I have shoeboxes and shoeboxes of these letters as well. So that was really enormous. I think even, even though, you know, none of us attended the same school, it was a way of keeping in touch. And I think having that shared, just that shared experience and kind of shared language for experience was, was really helpful.

**CHARIS:** And that opportunity for parallel growth, you know.

**SHARON:** Yeah.

**CHARIS:** You know, there were times when some of us were closer and then, you know, there were some periods where we were like less closely in touch and then grew closer together. You know, like that kind of that wave pattern that relationships do. And I think, you know, even now in our circle, it's a safe place to like explore different ideas about, you know. Grappling with religion and. Grappling with other social questions where sometimes you just need to talk it out.

**SHARON:** Right, of trying out, trying out ideas and trying out thought experiments. And, and being in a place where, I mean, for those of us who've had really, you know, identity shifting events or evolutions. I think it's been a really safe place to, to know that you would still be really fully accepted.

**CHARIS:** And not, not just unquestioning support either. I feel like as a group that we intellectually challenge each other. And I think that, that something, like an important aspect of what the Mutual Admiration Society did, which it really wasn't just mutual admiration, it was challenging and asking questions. And, I don't know, just, just that intellectual give and take and pushing each other, but without it being confrontational or…

**SHARON:** Aggressive?

**CHARIS:** Yeah

**SHARON:** Well, and for me, I mean, it's definitely been not just like an intellectual staging ground for my beliefs or my identity. I mean, it's quite literally been a place where I could try out academic ideas, right? When I was still in my PhD, often when I was having kind of unformed thoughts or needed to work something out… And I was too terrified to go to my committee members and just kind of babble for a while, you know, I would, I would call people up and say, like, hey, stick with me while I work through this. And, you know, I mean, that's, that's really like

the… the birthing place of this podcast was that group chat that… the group video calls about GAUDY NIGHT when I was like Ahhhh, there's something here about like, the matchbooks, the inkwells, and I don't know what it is. Let me just talk for a bit. And then everyone else would sort of contribute their ideas or say, oh, that reminds me of, you know, this other thing in the book. And it, yeah, it was so helpful to have a place, also, I think, where I remembered that approaching literature could be… fun?

**CHARIS:** So easy to forget! So strangely easy to forget.

**SHARON:** Yeah, yeah, especially when you're in a grad program that you're not sure you want to continue in. And I mean. You know, I had very supportive people in my cohort as well, but certainly my experience of academia was much more on the, the combative, confrontational sense. And I just personally always had a really hard time with that. And so just being in a place where I knew people would be rigorous with me, but it never felt personal or like deeply existential.

**CHARIS:** Yeah.

**SHARON:** In terms of like questioning my worth or, or my intelligence or so forth, that was… that was really important for me.

**CHARIS:** I feel like maybe that… what you just said is kind of the key point about what makes relationships like we found in kind of our circle and that Sayers found with the Mutual Admiration Society, is that it's a place where you can explore academic ideas or social ideas without your ideas being tied to your worth.

**SHARON:** It's also not just a place of intellectual sharing, right? Like we have deeply creative people in the circle. And it's been a place where we've been able to share writing and art and short stories, poetry, novels that people have created. And again, ask for feedback, but also receive support. And I don't know, I think, you know, going all the way back to when we were fifteen and writing like really bad LORD OF THE RINGS fanfiction…

**CHARIS:** I don't know what you are talking about. I do not know to what… to what you refer.

**SHARON:** A likely story.

**CHARIS:** I know nothing of the subject you mention. It was very good LORDS OF THE RINGS fanfiction. Extremely high quality. No Mary Sues is involved.

**SHARON:** No, not at all. Charis, I'm going to boast about you a bit. You have written a very, very excellent novel that we all love and have all cried over and deeply desire to see published so that more people can love it and cry over it. But I… you know, I'd like to think that having cheerleaders was at least a bit helpful.

**CHARIS:** So helpful. Extremely helpful. I live for it. But yeah, it goes back to that idea that art doesn't happen in a vacuum. You know, like you see that writing advice go around. It's like, oh, you'll, you need to be writing for yourself. I'm just like, well, if I'm writing for myself, I don't need to write. I can sit around and daydream all day long if I am going to the blood, sweat, and tears of putting words on a page. It's because I want them to go to other people.

And sometimes you need to have specific people in mind or you need to, you know, like Sayers in her collaborations with Muriel's St. Claire Byrne, you know, that she needed that other person to pull it, just to pull the emotional element out of her, because there's you know, if that hadn't happened, like if that collaboration to write the play of BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON had never happened, I don't think that GAUDY NIGHT would have happened. Because that collaboration. I mean, like theoretically without me having done the actual research, but just thinking about it, it seems likely to me that that collaboration is what in some ways taught Sayers to think about that aspect of her character's emotional lives. You know, like obviously she, she touches on their emotions, she touches on their emotional development in the books. But GAUDY NIGHT really takes a turn even from, you know, HAVE HIS CARCASE has a lot of complex emotional stuff and complex relational stuff that GAUDY NIGHT really starts to take that apart. And, you know, would she have gone that deep if she hadn't had someone behind her poking her with a stick?

**SHARON:** Yeah, it's sort of like a terrifying thing to think about! Like, well, maybe we wouldn't have this podcast without Muriel St. Clare Byrne, right? They would have just been fun little detective stories.

**CHARIS:** Fun little intellectual, intellectual stories but I mean, who knows? Yeah. Art doesn't happen in a vacuum and Peter Wimsey didn't happen in a vacuum. And we have the Mutual Admiration Society to thank for a lot, I think. And we have Mo Moulton to thank for bringing, you know, the stories of those other members to us, which has been wonderful.

**SHARON:** We realized after we got off the line with them that we did forget to ask them to tell us the story about the lemon.

**CHARIS:** Yes, the lemon!

**SHARON:** Which I really, I don't know, I want to tell our listeners about what that's meant to, to you and me.

**CHARIS:** Yeah.

**SHARON:** So Mo did write a piece for The Toast, R.I.P., about this, so we will link it in the shownotes and everyone should absolutely go and read it. But basically during World War II, Marjorie Barber, who was a partner of Muriel St. Clare Byrnes and sort of this, you know, additional part of the, the, that core group of four, as the years went on, sent Sayers a lemon

through the post because it was so hard to get fresh fruits and vegetables, I think, of any kind. And Sayers called it a what… "a museum piece" and… oh, what was the phrase she used?

**CHARIS:** "A most beautiful and comforting lemon," was that the phrase?

**SHARON:** Can I find it… yes, a "very beautiful and encouraging lemon."

**CHARIS:** Yes.

**SHARON:** Yeah. So, yeah, Sayers and her husband argued about when they should cut into what they should use it for. And we were both so delighted--

**CHARIS:** Yeah.

**SHARON:** --with that anecdote when we, when we first read that Toast article several years ago. And Charis, when, when I was going through kind of one of the hardest periods of my life, you actually sent me a gorgeous watercolor of a lemon through the post, you know, and it *was* a very beautiful and encouraging lemon! It… I had it sort of taped up over my desk. I think it came in like the dead of winter as well and it was really gloomy. And it was, it was very comforting because I think it just… I mean, it referenced so many things that we both loved and that have been a large part of our friendship. And it reminded me that, you know, I had true friends in my corner.

**CHARIS:** Yep. A true friend gives you lemons. [both laugh] There's now this long pause, like, do I hug my computer now? It's so far! And this the problem with long distance friendships.

**SHARON:** It is a problem! Sometimes you just want to hug. Well, our little two person mutual admiration society here. Thanks for sticking with us, listeners!

**CHARIS:** And I mean, we would be remiss if we didn't say all our love to our friends and our circle as well. Because we are, we are not the only two. We are just the two who happened to be talking.

**SHARON:** In public.

**CHARIS:** Yeah, in public, right now.

**SHARON:** Well, and I think, you know, maybe we would have done it anyway. But it was, we certainly started this podcast with the encouragement of those friends.

**CHARIS:** Yeah, I do, like I think we told ourselves like, well, at least these four people will listen. There's, there's three to six people that are bound to be listeners.

**SHARON:** Yeah. And between them and our families, our, our listenership will be in the tens! We will have tens of listeners!

**CHARIS:** We will twist the arm of some extended relations and get it up to fifty! And, you know, on that note, we are very grateful to all of our listeners who have listened to our previous episodes, who are listening now, who have interacted with us on Twitter. We have been having a wonderful time.

**SHARON:** It's been delightful.

**CHARIS:** Yes, it really has. And we hope that all of you will check out Mo's new book. We hope that you'll go see them on their book tour and tell us all about it, since we both live far away and are not able to go ourselves.

**SHARON:** Deeply devastated.

[snippet of theme music]

**SHARON:** Thank you all so much for joining us for this special episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me and a special thanks to our guest, Mo Moulton. We will be back on our regular schedule with another episode on CLOUDS OF WITNESS on November 18th. So look for us then.

**CHARIS:** In the meantime, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram, is @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.

**SHARON:** Our logo is by Gabi Viciso. And our theme music was composed and recorded by Sarah Meholick. If you've enjoyed this episode of Ask 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. And we do hope that you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

**CHARIS:** See you next time for more talking piffle!

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