

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 4 transcript

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

SHARON: Hello and welcome to Episode 4 of As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Sharon Hsu--

CHARIS: And I'm Charis Ellison! Today, we're continuing our discussion of CLOUDS OF WITNESS and we'll be talking about the solution of the mystery. So if you haven't finished the book and don't want to be spoiled for the whodunnit, remember to listen for our warning so that you can pause the episode before we give away the ending.

SHARON: Yes, finish the novel and then come back.

CHARIS: And in the meantime, we'll continue our investigation into the Riddlesdale mystery and the trial of the Duke of Denver before the House of Lords for murder.

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

CHARIS: So Sharon, hopefully for our listeners, it's only been two weeks since we posted our last episode, but for you and I, it has been so long. [chuckle]

SHARON: So long that I've forgotten quite a bit of what we said in the last episode. [laughing] Yes, why has it been so long, Charis?

CHARIS: Well, to start with, we took turns getting bronchitis. [chuckle] This is because you went on the moors without your shawl.

SHARON: It is entirely because of that, yes, yes.

CHARIS: Far too dangerous, yes. And then I got bronchitis and still have it a little bit. And you purchased a house and moved into it.

SHARON: I purchased a hou-- Yes, uh, which was quite, quite the whirlwind, very unexpectedly purchased the first house that we saw and bid on. Who does that?

CHARIS: As a millennial, I can tell you it's very exciting to know a real adult, someone who owns a house.

SHARON: [laughing] Well, so far it's been home repairs and multiple trips to hardware stores when we very irresponsibly do not measure twice and cut once.

CHARIS: I'm pretty sure that that's like entirely what home ownership is. It's just going to the hardware store over and over again for the rest of your life.

SHARON: They really should give me a punch card.

CHARIS: So, it has been a while since we've talked and a while since we recorded. But in the meantime, I've been working on editing our first few episodes and I... Before we get into any other topics, I actually want to go back to something that I said in Episode 2 and correct it, because you know, the thing where you have a thought in the moment and you're trying to express it and you know you're not getting it quite right, but you...

SHARON: [mock seriously] I have no idea what you mean, [CHARIS laughing in the background] I always express myself perfectly. [SHARON bursts into laughter]

CHARIS: Oh, yes, absolutely perfectly. That's why you have one and a half of the English decrees in this partnership. But yeah, in our second episode, I just kind of in the moment, I was thinking about genre fiction and murder mysteries. And I said that one of the things that's intriguing about murder mysteries is that you aren't safe where you think you're safe. And I knew in the moment that I wasn't quite saying what I meant, but I couldn't figure out how to correct myself. And like, in the course of editing the episode and having to hear myself say that repeatedly, it's just been bothering me more and more and I actually figured out what I was trying to... how to say what I was trying to express by listening to someone else's podcast.

There's a podcast called Shedunnit, and it's produced and hosted by Caroline Crampton. She was a guest on then another person's podcast, a podcast called The Allusionist, and she was talking about murder mystery and detective fiction as convalescent literature, which is not a term that I think that I have ever heard before, but it makes so much sense to me. It's the concept of something that you read for comfort, like you read it when you're sick, you read it when you're recovering from something, something that you read that is entertaining but at the same time restful.

SHARON: Right. And I think that comes back to some of what we've talked about, about how the genre of mystery fiction gives you a predictable narrative framework and that that dissipates some of the, maybe the suspense... or not dissipates but it makes the suspense, or the horror, or the... the...

CHARIS: You have an idea of what expectations to go in with.

SHARON: Right. And you know that some kind of, like, catharsis is gonna be provided by the end, the mystery will be solved.

CHARIS: Right. Whereas, what I was trying to express before, I really misspoke when I said it's the idea that you aren't safe where you think that you're safe because no, I'm just like actually, that's not true of detective fiction, that is very much like a horror fiction concept. You know, that idea of, you know, that there's no safety. I was like, that doesn't reflect what I was trying to say at all. It's like I disagree with my past self. She gets a B, B minus.

[SHARON laughs]

But in hearing Caroline Crampton's explanation about convalescent literature and detective fiction, I figured out how to say what I meant to say, which is that, it's not so much that you aren't safe, because generally the detective is safe, even if there's a sense that there's an element of danger. Like in this book, Peter faces danger a couple of times. He gets shot, he gets stuck in a bog. But there's an understanding that the detective is going to continue, there's a security in that the detective is not gonna be killed off and by extension you, the reader, who's associated with the detective, you are also safe.

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: But so, more what I meant that I think that detective fiction does, is that it touches on the idea that death and murder and tragedy, it appears in all areas and classes and walks of human life, right?

SHARON: Mm-hmm. It's a democratizing force.

CHARIS: Right. And there's no idyllic country setting is going to be free from that potential for death and tragedy, especially tragedy caused by human hands. And this is what I've been thinking about as I reread CLOUDS OF WITNESS. Well, and like specifically, the episode of The Allusionist that Caroline Crampton was a guest on, she mentions the fact that death is distant in detective fiction. It's present, but it's a little bit sanitized. It's not intensely gory. Even in CLOUDS OF WITNESS, we hear a lot about lots of blood. There's blood everywhere, but we aren't getting visceral descriptions of how it's sticky, how blood smells. It's there, we know that it's there, and we move on.

SHARON: Right. Right. Like the murder itself is often part of the pre-history of these detective novels. Like you come upon the body, but it's not... There's no loving description of somebody being horrifically murdered the way that there might be in suspense or horror, yeah.

CHARIS: Mm-hmm. And there's very much like... the corpse is an object. In WHOSE BODY? we talked a little bit about the way that the... I just forgot the word for when you dig up a body.

SHARON: Exhumation.

CHARIS: Yes, thank you. [laughter] But we talked about the way that the exhumation is written. That whole scene primarily taking place in dialogue is a way of distancing us from the visceral grossness of a cut-up decomposing corpse which we as the reader, we as the viewer, don't really experience at all even though we get all the information we need.

SHARON: Exactly, yeah.

CHARIS: And thinking about that kind of clinical distance, but at the same time, the way that we're being reminded of the presence of death itself, and then thinking about that in terms of

post-war England, the conclusion I came to is that what detective fiction is accomplishing is making death something that can make sense, and making death something that can be solved. And creating a world and creating a catharsis where justice is possible. We talked in our episodes about WHOSE BODY? about how horrific World War I was, right? And I think... I really think it's safe to say that there was no one in Britain after the war whose life wasn't touched directly by death in some way. And in so many ways, World War I was just like this incredibly brutal experience that I'm sure, for many people, felt almost pointless. Because of the way warfare changed, so many people died in situations, that you had to ask yourself like, "What did their death accomplish?"

SHARON: Right. And so much of the literature that gets produced around and post-war, you really see that shift from like, "Oh, yes, this is the great war. This is the war that's gonna end the war," into a kind of disillusionment.

CHARIS: Even for people who obviously weren't on the front, they were dealing with the aftermath of people not coming back at all, people coming back with horrific injuries, people coming back with shellshock. So it makes sense to me that murder mysteries are acknowledging that, that omnipresence of death while at the same time making, creating a structure around death where there's a solution, where there's meaning. And saying like, "Okay, we can look at this death and put all of the pieces together and understand." Whereas for most people, everything that happened in the war, it's just like, "Why did this... " You know. 'Cause they were so... Like the political background was so complex, and there were so many moving pieces.

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: You just imagine that your average person was dealing with the aftermath and going like, "Why did this have to happen?"

SHARON: Mm-hmm. And that's kind of fundamentally... the narrativization or putting those pieces together in a really tidy cause and effect way is fundamentally what drives the resolution in murder mysteries, right? It's like every clue becomes either startlingly important, or you can dismiss it as a red herring, but everything gets explained and..

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: Like even in this book, the whole... I don't know. A lot of the final trial I think ends up being a way of narrativizing Cathcart's life such that it's like, "Okay, everything's kind of pointing to this one night at Riddlesdale." Because X, Y, Z happened to him, then it created this kind of personality and etcetera, etcetera.

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: I don't wanna get too much into the ending quite yet, but yeah.

CHARIS: Yeah, we're not quite ready for that, but it reminds me of there's a bit where we meet Impey Biggs who's the solicitor, who is representing Gerald alongside the delightful Mr. Murbles. But there's a scene where Impey Biggs is talking to Peter, and he's discouraging Peter from finding out too much information about like there's an unknown party who was on the grounds the night Cathcart died, and Impey Biggs is saying, "Maybe don't find out too much about that because it might be more useful in terms of a court defense for us to not know the truth." And Lord Peter is just like, "Well, surely once we know the truth, everything will make sense." We've talked about Peter's devotion to the truth before and how that becomes an increasing theme, I think, in the books.

And then we also talk last time about the separation between the American detective fiction as represented by writers like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and British detective fiction as represented by Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie. And yeah, just thinking about this is making me wonder how much of that is a difference in the post-war experience? You know?

SHARON: Mm-hmm. Say more.

CHARIS: Well, now we're getting into where I'm just like I hadn't quite figured this part out.

SHARON: [laughing] So in two more episodes, we can come back and...

CHARIS: Yeah, in two more episodes I'll come back and be like, "So remember when I was talking about that?" I have figured it out now. Well, I do... Any time talking about this, I'm just like I think this is a really interesting subject but also, I lack the familiarity with American detective fiction from this period to speak with authority, but the American post-war experience was obviously very different, it was not as all-encompassing of a tragedy, there was a big ocean creating a certain amount of distance.

SHARON: Right, I mean American cities weren't getting bombed every night.

CHARIS: Yeah, so it's not that Americans didn't fight or die or suffer or but it was not to the same scale. And so, you have writers like Raymond Chandler who objects to the British detective as being silly and that the British detective mystery as being bloodless. I think he might even... I would have to reread his essay on the art of detection, but he might say something along those lines, where it's just like it's treating murder and treating detective work like it's an intellectual puzzle is, as a disservice to what the actual work of detection is. But then you also have Raymond Chandler who, I think it's in *THE BIG SLEEP*, where a side character is murdered and there's no explanation, like it turns out not to have any connection to the rest of the mystery and you never find out who killed him or why.

SHARON: It's just like, "Oh, people die all the time."

CHARIS: But that's a very different attitude. You know, like Dorothy L. Sayers would never kill off a random person without explanation.

SHARON: Yeah, I also wonder if there's something to the idea that I think Britain and England in particular have kind of a longer tradition of thinking of literature or popular culture as a unifying force, partially. I think, because of... just there's a lot less geographic space to cover, right?

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: And I think... I don't know, I'm not as versed in American literature either, but I think a lot of the American myths of unification are maybe more historical, maybe more about like, "Oh, yeah, we are united by our belief in democracy, or the American dream and opportunity" and so forth. Whereas, in England, because of also the ways that publishing and history of the book and mass culture developed there, there was often this sort of trope of, like, everybody in England is waiting for the next installment of Sir Walter Scott's latest book, or everybody is reading Dickens serialized at the same time. I don't... And obviously, like Americans do that too.

CHARIS: Yeah, which is true, but then also culturally, the individualism in America is...

SHARON: Exactly.

CHARIS: We want to believe that we're highly individual, regardless of any proofs to the contrary. [SHARON chuckles] It is one of the cultural differences that probably informs that very clear separation between the two schools of detective fiction.

SHARON: Mm-hmm. Like, books that are about individual action for individual consumption versus books that are... whether consciously or not, existed in this movement of literature. Yeah, like convalescence, I suppose, or catharsis, or some kind of accounting for a national trauma and a collective trauma. And again, not to get too much into the end of the book, but during the trial, Peter is off trying to secure one last piece of information to acquit Gerald and it's really interesting to me how that part is written, because he's flying back over the Atlantic, and there's this very dramatic bit where Sir Impey Biggs stands up and is like, "Gentlemen, the barometer is falling." And there's this implication in the text that all of England, the newspaper headlines are like, "Peer's son flying across Atlantic, doomed mission." So that similarly to all of England is reading Mr. Dickens, it's like all of England is waiting for Peter Wimsey to come back in a way that I just think would never happen in an American detective novel.

CHARIS: I think... And some of that obviously is just physical space, it's like, it's really hard to get all of Americans to do anything at all. We can't even get everyone to vote. [laughing] But yeah, well, I don't know, I don't know. I lost the thread. I lost the thread.

SHARON: That's all right.

CHARIS: It'll come. In two episodes [both laughing] join us again when Charis will remember what she was trying to say, she'll have figured it out.

SHARON: Well, I also think it's really comical that we are drawing in such broad strokes about the differences between English culture and American culture because one of the things that actually drives me a little bit bonkers about this book is how blithely there's these large stereotypes about national origin and what that means about people.

CHARIS: Oh, yeah, that's very true.

SHARON: Right? [sarcastically] The French are sensual and passionate, and Dennis was just, he really embraced his French side. And that's why he was in this doomed love affair [normall] and Helen, the Duke of Denver's wife, as like the quintessential English woman who is cold and...

CHARIS: Yeah, wasn't there... There's even a line where she says something about the lower orders are so something. I don't know but I just remember reading that line where she's like "the lower orders" and I was like, "Ugh!"

SHARON: Yeah. [chuckle]

CHARIS: Oh my. Like. "Woah."

SHARON: You just said that thing out loud, didn't you, Helen?

CHARIS: Yeah, you just opened your mouth and that fell out, wow!

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: But yeah, it is a fact that... you and I were talking a little bit about how interesting it is that Peter goes, "Oh, I should have been able to look at Cathcart's bedside book and understood everything."

SHARON: Yeah, which is... Okay, first of all, like a horrifying... immediately made me feel really self-conscious about having the correct bedside books in case / get murdered and someone comes in and is like, "Oh, yes, yes, I immediately knew everything about her because of what she was reading."

CHARIS: Oh, no. I'm gonna go hide the romance novel that I have next to my bed right now. [chuckle]

SHARON: No, no, be proud. Romance is great. Much maligned genre.

CHARIS: Yes. Yes.

SHARON: Completely unfairly maligned.

CHARIS: Yes. No, I am on a kick of reading lots of romance fiction at the moment, and I am just like I... Speaking of convalescent literature, I have been convalescing and all I want is this over and over and over again.

SHARON: Truly. Comfort reads, comfort reads for a reason, yeah.

CHARIS: Right. So I think my... I won't get rid of my bedside romance novel, but I will just endeavor not to get murdered. [chuckle]

SHARON: That's a good plan for...

CHARIS: That's the best solution.

SHARON: ...for life. [both laugh]

CHARIS: Yes, but not to sidetrack what you were saying about the cultural expectation.

SHARON: Oh, yeah. I don't know, I think I only find it... I mean, and "annoying" maybe isn't even the right word. I find it really interesting what allusions Peter, but I think Sayers as well, expect the reader to share. Obviously this is something that the further anybody gets from the moment that a book was published, maybe the fewer shared references there are. Because, I don't know, I guess MANON LESCAUT was a very popular opera during this period. Maybe every other reader was also like, "Ah, yes. As soon as I saw that book on Cathcart's nightstand, I too!" But... I think this'll also really come up in GAUDY NIGHT, but I can never quite tell if it's supposed to be like, oh Peter is so clever and understands X, Y, Z. or no, even the normal or the non-Peter reader in 1927 or whenever wouldn't have caught that reference. That's a question that nobody can really ever solve for me.

CHARIS: Yeah. Maybe that's why we have our everyman Parker, who's just like, "I haven't read it. I don't know what you're talking about."

SHARON: That's true. Yeah. Poor Parker did not have Wikipedia, which is definitely how I found out everything I knew about this book.

CHARIS: The democratization of knowledge.

SHARON: Indeed. Should we talk about Cathcart a bit more, our poor victim?

CHARIS: Yeah, we neglected him, as is our typical fashion. We're just like, we'll talk about everything except the actual parts of the murder, including the corpse. But yeah. Do you want to give some, speaking of broad strokes, but give some rough outline about who Cathcart was for our listeners?



SHARON: Yeah. Denis Cathcart, I believe his mother was French, so he's half French, half English, but raised abroad. He has a maiden aunt who is very English to the backbone. In the inquest and trial, it comes out that she's like, "Oh this all happened because he lived in Paris for too long." [chuckling] There's this one part that says before the war, Denis Cathcart had undoubtedly been a rich man. He'd had a lot of investments that were bringing in a great deal of income. When the war breaks out, he joins up in a British regiment and really lives... I don't know... I feel there's a bit of George Wickham in him? He's a very dashing officer. But then as the global economy starts crashing during the war and post-war, much of Cathcart's investments just go up in flames and he ends up losing a lot of money.

After losing all this money, Parker finds out at first that he's able to live off of that and put himself back together. But then one of the pieces of the mystery is that he starts drawing out, taking out lines of credit and they're not entirely sure why, because according to Mary and other people who knew him, Cathcart was an extremely correct young man. So there were these flashes of... there's a lot of passion and sensuality, but he was also... that was at the core beneath a very English gentlemanly exterior.

So yeah. But it really struck me, this read through, the tragedy of Cathcart's life. I mean the war just cuts his life in half. He was raised to expect life to be one way and raised to really be able to move through the life of an English gentleman. Then because of the loss of his money and the loss of friendships and reputation and so forth, ends up getting himself in a bit of a bad place.

I feel like there's a lot maybe where we could parallel with Peter where... Peter's way out of that, his convalescence, the thing that gets him through, is finding something for his brain to do. Finding a way to make himself useful. Cathcart just didn't have that. He's someone who we find out more and more was really floundering for meaning and for something to attach his life and the meaning of his life to. Because of an inability to correctly diagnose himself and correctly figure out what he was going to be passionate about, he ends up dead.

CHARIS: Yeah. This idea that Cathcart is an immensely passionate person who, when his life falls apart and when he's trying to find his way, he ends up putting all of his passion into one thing and that it turns out not to have been maybe a safe emotional investment.

SHARON: Yeah. He falls in with a young woman named Simone. This comes out way later. Partially because he's so correct, he didn't leave around a lot of evidence that he had this mistress.

CHARIS: His life was very clearly separated between his passionate love affair and his very correct gentlemanly persona.

SHARON: But I also feel there's this aspect, he says later on or they find this letter where it becomes clear that the reason he's taking out these lines of credit and gambling and trying to make more money is because Simone has very, very expensive taste and he's desperate to keep her. He knows she will leave him if he can't support her in a certain lifestyle anymore. But I

feel that still goes back to this idea that he was raised to be a gentleman's gentleman. An English gentleman, of course, will always take care of his mistress very, very well. So he's really caught between these narratives or these roles that society was offering him.

CHARIS: Yeah. But he feels a responsibility to maintain standards.

SHARON: Exactly. Both publicly with friends and also with this woman that he loves who has certain expectations. That's really what Peter means when he says, "Oh, I should've known the moment I saw MANON on his nightstand." That he was in fact not just the upright young English officer, but that there was a great deal of feeling and emotion lurking underneath the surface. Yeah. It's interesting.

So we talked last time about how CLOUDS OF WITNESS really is one of the books in the series that offers a bunch of examples of different kinds of romantic heterosexual relationships between men and women. You have the Pettigrew-Robinsons, you have Gerald and Helen's marriage that's very unhappy. You see Cathcart and Simone, Cathcart and Mary, Mary and Goyles. I think there's another relationship that I really want to talk about, which is Mrs. Grimethorpe and Gerald. Which we didn't get into last time because another plot point that comes out as you go along, it turns out that the reason Gerald even stumbled across the body at 3:00 AM and could not account for his whereabouts beforehand, and that's why he's on trial to begin with is because he was having an affair with a woman who lived near the Riddlesdale property. Yeah. Charis, do you want to talk a little bit about what the Grimethorpe situation was?

CHARIS: Yeah, Mr. Grimethorpe is a farmer who there's a small farm in a valley on the other side a bit more from Riddlesdale Lodge. So walking distance. Grimethorpe, who we meet a little fairly early in the book, is a deeply terrible person. Brutal to his wife.

SHARON: Sets his dogs on Peter.

CHARIS: But his wife, she's described more than once as a Medusa. Peter first sees her really briefly in a dark room and she's very frightened because of her husband. He calls her a Medusa head of terror because Medusa was beautiful. There's this idea that Mrs. Grimethorpe is almost otherworldly beautiful. That's one of the things that makes her husband so brutal is that he is so jealous of the attention that she gets from men. He just assumes that because she gets attention from men that she must be partaking, which it turns out that she was, but I wouldn't blame her just looking for any interaction that's going to be maybe gentle and loving as opposed to what she obviously goes through every day.

SHARON: Right. It's interesting because we can't really talk about Gerald and Mrs. Grimethorpe without really examining the power differential there, I think. What does consent mean? I mean on the one hand, Gerald is not the property owner. Mr. Grimethorpe doesn't work for him. They're not beholden to him. He is only just renting the lodge. Yeah. But at the same time, he's so far above her in class and wealth, in opportunity, in everything that... I don't know. I think the novel really raises the question, in the background, of what was the role of power in that affair?

It's very clear that it's not a love affair. They're not in love with each other. Gerald is maybe just like, "Okay, I'm going to have a bit of fun." But for her, I mean this is something that puts her life at risk really.

CHARIS: Yeah. It's a very real danger for her. It's that question of, was she maybe hoping that she could find some way to leave her husband with Gerald's help? What motivates her to take her life in her hands for the sake of this love affair?

SHARON: [disgusted] For the sake of *Gerald*.

CHARIS: For the sake of Gerald! [both laughing]

SHARON: Let's be fair.

CHARIS: I'm not so sure that I would cross the street for Gerald. He's a bit of an ass.

SHARON: Yeah. There's this bit where when Peter first meets her, the narrator says ... So it's right after he describes her or the narrative describes her as Medusa-like. Then it says that "She had a wide passionate mouth shaped so wonderfully that, even in the strenuous moment, sixteen generations of feudal privilege stirred in Lord Peter's blood." And that, that is *really* uncomfortable.

CHARIS: A little bit. Yeah.

SHARON: The narrative is essentially saying that Peter has this moment where it's, oh, if we were living back in the whatever century and you were the peasant on my manor lands, then I would avail myself of ...

CHARIS: Yeah, that implication of I want something, I should be able to have it. Which, that's reminding me a little bit of what we were just saying about Cathcart, that he was raised to be a gentleman. He was raised to keep up certain standards. The narrative I think puts a lot of blame on Simone in some ways. There seems to be this implication, I think, in the narrative that Cathcart would have lived within even his lessened income, that he would've lived within his means if he weren't trying to frantically support this woman so that he wouldn't lose her and that it's her fault that he turned to cheating at cards and these dishonorable things. But at the same time, it's a little bit like, why is he entitled to keep an expensive mistress if he can't support her?

SHARON: Right, right. I mean the implications are her options after the war were extremely limited as well. I mean, okay, first of all. Sex work is *work*. I mean, when Peter finds her, she's extremely pragmatic about the men that she's attached herself to because I think similarly to how we talked about last time, that Mary's options are much more limited than her brother's are and she has the benefit of being this upper-class woman, Simone's options are extremely limited. I agree with you that the narrative blames her in a way that I'm not entirely sure is fair.

I also want to bring up, speaking of Mrs. Grimethorpe, I feel like the Grimethorpes are really where CLOUDS OF WITNESS is at its most Sherlock Holmesy, by which I mean there's a lot of parallels between THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES and this book, right? It's been a long time since I've read THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES, but there is also a bog. There is this mysterious duo in that book. This woman who is attached to the property somehow, whom the lord of the manor falls in love with. Obviously bogs and moors are dangerous in both. That certainly dramatic moment where Peter and Bunter get stuck.

CHARIS: Well, Peter gets stuck and Bunter rescues him because Bunter is the person who has common sense.

SHARON: That's true. Yes.

CHARIS: Yeah. My sister was reading CLOUDS OF WITNESS and I forget at what point she was in the book, but she was just like, "Bunter is the only person around with any common sense at all." I'm just like, "Well you're not wrong."

SHARON: Yeah, extremely correct. But Bunter ... I think the reason why none of these mysteries can be told from Bunter's point of view is that there would be no murders if Bunter was in charge of everything, just as if the Dowager Duchess was in charge of everything. She says here, "None of this would've happened if I'd been around." I think that's extremely true of Bunter as well!

CHARIS: But yeah, it's such a tense and dramatic section, which we get from actually Bunter's perspective. Peter gets stuck. He's neck deep in a bog, which is not a place where you want to be and Bunter is doing his best to keep him supported without sinking himself and they're calling for help. And it's just like, "Oh my goodness." It's a tense moment. Well, I'm just thinking you have this very tense, dramatic foggy night and then Peter faints and they end up spending the night in the Grimethorpe's house. First thing in the morning Bunter has found a razor somewhere. He's coming in with razor. It's like Bunter, you just rescued him out of a bog, and he was in the bog but it was his own fault. You have still managed to behave like the perfect gentleman's gentleman in these completely ridiculous, insane circumstances. Really, Bunter?

SHARON: Could you be more perfect? Yeah. He scares up a breakfast tray for him too. It was just like, "Oh my goodness." This is why, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think in THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES, somebody dies in the bog, right? Like later on.

CHARIS: I cannot remember, because not only has it been a really long time since I've actually read THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES, when I think about it, all I can think about is the Wishbone TV episode, which I think they probably omitted that from the TV show where Sherlock Holmes was being played by a dog. I think they left that out.

SHARON: [laughing] An extremely good dog.

CHARIS: Very good dog.

SHARON: Okay. Well, okay. Neither of us can remember and we are doing minimal research.

CHARIS: I keep being like, "I think this."

SHARON: I think it happened.

CHARIS: We'll put it in the show notes if we were correct.

SHARON: Yes. Apologies to our listeners who have not read *THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES* if we did in fact spoil it. And apologies to our listeners who've read it and know that we are wrong, if we are indeed wrong.

CHARIS: Just apologies all around.

SHARON: Yes. But like I said last time, the thing that we know from Victorian literature as a whole is that moors and bogs always want to kill you.

CHARIS: They want you dead.

SHARON: Yes. I do think that Sayers is playing a lot with that trope here. I mean, the fact that Peter falls in halfway through [the book], we know he's going to be fine, but I think that is where so much of the suspense comes from is that everybody who's read any book from the 19th century is like, "Oh, bogs are bad. Get out of there."

CHARIS: Yeah. Well actually part of this bit where they're at the farm, it's the most Yorkshire I think that the book gets. It's the most local color we get because Riddlesdale could be any English manor anywhere because everyone there is the generic upper class English. But you're not getting local color there. It's a little bit like going overseas and eating at a McDonald's. It's like, yeah, maybe there's one or two unique things on the menu, but it's still a McDonald's and Riddlesdale is just like, "Yes, we brought our own servants. We brought all our own stuff." It's...

SHARON: Right. Whereas Grider's hole, which is where the Grimethorpes live, everybody speaks in a Yorkshire accent, which is extremely interesting to read on the page.

CHARIS: There's actually a reference when Peter is being carried into the house. There's this nightmare quality to it. One of the farm workers starts singing a song, which is at some point after reading *CLOUDS OF WITNESS*, I looked the song up because I had listened to the audio book and just the snippet that's in the audio book got stuck in my head. I'm just like, "Well I have to look this up now." It's a song called "Ilkla Moor Baht 'at." It's a whole song about how the moor wants to kill you. It's a whole song about how the moor wants to kill you, and it was such a popular song that it's actually referred to as the Yorkshire Anthem. When I looked it up, I found newspaper articles about young Yorkshire people don't know this song. We should be teaching

it in our schools because they're losing part of their Yorkshire heritage. I'm just like, "That's the Yorkshire heritage, that the moors want to kill you."

SHARON: That's amazing. Is this also a song that has 50,000 stanzas?

CHARIS: It has quite a few verses. But apparently a choir went on a picnic on Ilkla Moor and two members of the choir wandered off and came back in a state of compromised dress and everyone was giving them a very hard time about it. Apparently on the bus or whatever they were... I'm not sure what the time period was. I don't know if it was a bus or a wagon, but someone started making up the song. By the time they got home, they had the whole thing written with harmonies because that's what happens when an entire choir is roasting you.

SHARON: That's amazing. May we all be so blessed.

CHARIS: Yeah. It's a song that's in the Yorkshire dialect. It's kind of a dialect song, but "Ilkla Moor Baht 'at" means "on Ilkla Moor without a hat." The chorus of the song is Ilkla Moor Baht 'at. It's like on Ilkla Moor without a hat, and it progresses through versus of where have you been? You've been courting Mary Jane on Ilkla Moor without a hat. You're going to catch your death of cold and then we're going to have to bury you. Then the worms are going to come and eat you up, and then the ducks will come and eat up worms and then we'll come and eat up ducks, and then we'll all have eaten you. The last verse is about how there's a moral to this tale. Don't go without your hat.

SHARON: That is excellent. Because you will end up food for the ducks.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: That's incredible.

CHARIS: It's amazing.

SHARON: [laughing] I am so happy you told me about that!

CHARIS: It is amazing. That's the song that this person is singing in the background. So it's a reference to how stupid are you to have been on the moor, and also this implication that you are on the moor for funny business. No doubt feeding in to Mr. Grimethorpe's obsession with the fact that people are coming sniffing around his wife.

SHARON: Despite how ill-advised that was on Peter's part, he does get a very key piece of evidence, which was a letter that the Duke had said he'd received but had gone missing. He was like, "Oh, I don't know. I must have misplaced it. Oh no. I burnt it." And it was the one thing that would have exonerated him. And where does Peter find it but shoved into a window in Mrs. Grimethorpe's bedroom, because the night that Gerald was visiting her was windy and so on and so forth. So I guess Peter did not risk his life for nothing.

CHARIS: Yeah, I guess not. When we talked a little bit about... We were talking about the power differential between Gerald and Mrs. Grimethorpe and just how much power did she feel she had to refuse him? But at the same time, Gerald is at the risk of his life refusing to get her involved in the murder investigation.

SHARON: That's true.

CHARIS: It's a little bit like, well you shouldn't have been there at all. You shouldn't have been putting her in this situation, but at least you are being kind of honorable about it. But at the same time, Peter, it's made very clear that he's just like, "Well, I'm going to do everything I can to help protect this woman." But at the same time, he's just like, "If I'm forced to, I'm going to make you come forward."

SHARON: The drama or the suspense of the second half of the novel is really the question of will Peter find an alternative method to clear Gerald's name? Because he does have Mrs. Grimethorpe in his metaphorical back pocket, but he's like, "No, I need to find a way," to clear his name without it being dangerous to her.

CHARIS: Right. But there is also that... There's a willingness on Peter's part to put her in danger if it means having the truth out. I think that also speaks to that sense of privilege and that sense of power over someone else because of his rank. It's a little bit-

SHARON: Right. It's not like he's giving her the decision actually.

CHARIS: Right. It's just like even as she's consenting to this, the narrative implies that she was a willing participant and the affair with Gerald. She talks about how he was kind and good to her, but just even in that situation it's like, well you still were lacking power in that situation.

SHARON: Right, right. You didn't have equal power.

CHARIS: Right. So it's just like there's a sense that Gerald abused his power in order to have that affair, but then he's willing to put himself in danger to protect her reputation and Peter is willing to put himself in danger with this transatlantic flight that he goes on. He is in very real danger in that to get this alternative piece of evidence so that she won't have to come forward. But he is also still using his power to say, "If I have to, I will force you."

SHARON: Which makes me really happy that at the end she gets to just walk away and be a free woman.

CHARIS: Yeah. So happy. I'm just like, "You deserve that." But yeah. But it's just that complicated question of... I don't know. It's like, okay, so you're both abusing your power and doing your best to do right by the people that you have power over and those two things are coexisting.

SHARON: Yeah. I mean, to borrow Charles's phrase, it feels very like the playing fields of Eton attitude, right? It's like a noblesse oblige kind of thing. It's interesting how often this novel in particular reverts to the language of feudalism or medievalism. Several things are described as medieval. I mean, I can't quite tell if the novel is condemning the ways that the Wimseys use their power, but it's all part and parcel of this whole idea that the Wimsey name goes back, is embedded into the English aristocracy.

CHARIS: Yeah. Well, it's one of those areas where I feel like Sayers didn't challenge herself enough. We talked a little bit about how in a literary sense, she experimented a lot with Modernism and in many ways she had very modern ideas about women in education and feminism, but then there are other places where you're just like, "Wow, you seem to have thought about this a little bit, but you didn't overcome your cultural biases enough to get it all the way to the final conclusion." If that makes sense.

I feel like this is one of those areas, and I think I can talk about this without spoiling things for our readers, but I think this is something that's going to come up when we talk about BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON, right? Because BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON makes several references to the stability that comes with Peter's rank and makes some references to a type of security that someone feels about being part of a class system where everyone knows who they are and knows their place and knows their role. There's an implication that, oh, that feels secure and comforting as opposed to challenging that idea in a way that I think could have been really interesting.

SHARON: Right. Rather than examining the ways that that system is built on, well both the labor and also the disenfranchisement of a whole swath of people.

CHARIS: Yeah. The physical labor but also the emotional labor. There's more than one reference in the course of the books to upper class people seeking emotional comfort with lower classes. I will have to look this up to see if I can find it, but I can't even remember which book it's in, but I think someone is described as they need comfort and they go with the sense of the homing pigeon to the kitchen to be comforted. In this book, so there's this little bit at the beginning of chapter four in CLOUDS OF WITNESS, there's this wonderful conversation that Peter is having with Bunter, right? Bunter has brought him his coffee and Peter is saying, "We must have the facts." Bunter quotes something that his mother used to tell him about how facts are like cows. "If you look them in the face hard enough, they generally run away. She is a very courageous woman, my Lord."

The book says that, "Lord Peter stretched out his hand impulsively, but Mr. Bunter was too well trained to see it." But it's just like this moment of Peter is feeling the strain of knowing that the facts that he uncovers may endanger at least one of his siblings, and Bunter's comforting him, but the comfort can't go too far because it wouldn't be correct and Bunter is much too correct to let that happen.



SHARON: Right. Will save you from a bog but not give you a hug.

CHARIS: Right. After he saved Peter from a bog, I think Peter says, "I won't do anything embarrassing, but thanks all the same." I think there's this idea that the lower classes are allowed to have emotions in a way that the upper classes are not because there's supposed to be this idea of control. Control seems to have been a big part of Cathcart's character and he keeps his passion very tightly leashed. We see Peter doing the same thing. Peter is described as taking after the French side of the Wimsey family and has this passionate nature that he is always keeping controlled because that's how he's been trained. Yeah. I think that there's this idea that the lower classes do a lot of emotional labor for the upper classes.

SHARON: Right. I wanted to briefly touch back on this idea of Sayers examining some biases or interested in upending some cultural assumptions but not others because they're... Let's just look at the spot of anti-Semitism in this book. I mean there's the bit where Mrs. Grimethorpe, she's described as having Jewish features. It's right after Peter stays over night and he's going to thank her extensively but also to try to pump her for some information. I'm going to read this whole description because I think it is just so intense and a little weird. She emerges once again from a dark doorway. So she's always coming out of dark places, which is interesting.

"Framed there, the cold sunlight just lighting upon her still dead white face and heavy dark hair, she was more wonderful than ever. There was no trace of Yorkshire descent in the long dark eyes and curled mouth. The curve of nose and cheekbones vouched for an origin immensely remote. Coming out of the darkness, she might've just risen from her far tomb in the pyramids dropping the dry and perfumed grave bands from her fingers. Lord Peter pulled himself together. Foreign, he said to himself matter of factly, touch of Jew perhaps or Spanish is it? Remarkable type. Don't blame Jerry. I couldn't live with Helen myself."

I mean there's a *lot* to unpack here. The idea that part of her attractiveness, this attractiveness that almost makes men lose control or whatever is on account of foreign blood. I mean there's a long history in Victorian literature as well of an English woman being put side by side with a Jewish Spanish woman. This happens in Walter Scott and so forth. The young hero needs to make the correct choice. Surprise! It's always the English woman.

CHARIS: So strange. So unexpected.

SHARON: I know, *quelle surprise!* But also the weird almost... mummification? I don't know. It's Orientalist. She may have emerged from the pyramids. She's exoticized. It so reminds me of how Walter Pater described the Mona Lisa in one of his essays, where he's like, "She's older than the rocks that she sits on." He calls her... I'm going to find the quote because it's so intense. Yeah. "She's older than the rocks among which she sits. Like the vampire, she has been dead many times and learned the secrets of the grave and has been a diver in deep seas and keeps their fallen about her." I don't know. Don't fetishize foreign women.

CHARIS: Yeah. Maybe just as a starting point.

SHARON: Yeah. The grave. She is very much... It's like a really uncomfortable way of calling her a femme fatale, I guess. She's literally a woman who both drives men to do stupid things that leads to their death and is deathly herself.

CHARIS: Right. That there's this-

SHARON: And great, she has Jewish features.

CHARIS: Yeah. I think at least twice the Medusa comparison is made. One from the first time that he sees her, and at another point, I think when they bring him in from the bog, he thinks it again or the narrator says it again. You look at the descriptive words even in this paragraph that she has a dead white face and her hair is heavy and dark. Yeah, it's, it's... I don't know where I was going with that, but yeah. But the associations with death and with darkness and it's like, hmmm, a little heavy-handed there, Sayers. Especially since I don't feel like her circumstances are her fault. Who knows what circumstances led her to marry Grimethorpe, but the fact that he is the type of guy who wants to hurt people, that's not her responsibility. The fact that men fail to control themselves around her is also not her responsibility.

SHARON: Exactly. You had also noticed another brief moment. A brief moment, a brief spot of anti-Semitism elsewhere.

CHARIS: Yeah. Well, it's just one of those moments that when we were talking about WHOSE BODY? I'm just like, there are just a couple of other small references that make me really come down on the side of just yeah, Sayers was anti-Semitic whether she wanted to admit it or not. Parker is in Paris, but he has quite by accident found the jewelry shop where the emerald and diamond cat was sold. He's interviewing the staff trying to identify who purchased it and when. It's just a throwaway line where it says that one of the staff members comes over having just finished selling an engagement ring to an elderly and obese Jew. It's just like, why did we need those particular specifics in that particular order?

SHARON: Yeah. I mean like the implication of "elderly" as though he's predatory.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: Right, and I really could do without the fatphobia.

CHARIS: Yeah. I can always do without fatphobia, but I doubt that it's something that Sayers thought about at all. She was just trying to create color for her scene, right?

SHARON: And it's especially disappointing because it comes after this really lovely interlude where Parker, being a good brother, is like "Hmm, what might my sister like as a souvenir from my Paris jaunt?" and he goes and buys her lingerie!

CHARIS: I know! I love the bit where he's undaunted. He remembers being in court and a judge asking what a camisole was and he's like "There didn't seem to be anything embarrassing about it, so I'm gonna go in and ask for a camisole and then mademoiselle will show me other things." Oh sweet Parker, you're so delightful.

SHARON: Yes, he's the best. Well... maybe let's talk about the trial?

CHARIS: Oh yeah, there's a trial in this book! [both laughing]

SHARON: Surprise!

CHARIS: Yes, let's talk about the trial... what should we say about the trial?

SHARON: Well, I think the thing I was really noticing in two books so far is... we've noticed that the way the inquest is conveyed is often strangely or differently formatted. So like in both books there are bits that are done as straight dialogue or script form. And I feel like there's this way in which this trial is really set up as theater and spectacle? When Sir Impey Biggs is first introduced way earlier in the narrative it says something like... oh yeah, "He was not an actor, but he had a shapely, expressive hand that would have made an actor's fortune."

CHARIS: He has a well-modulated voice.

SHARON: Exactly. So it's this whole idea that... kind of linking the whole idea that the very public spectacle of this public trial that Gerald is on depends in some part on a certain kind of theatrics. That's where Sir Impey Biggs is much more cognizant of clues and facts and how he can... not fudge them? But present them in the most dramatic way possible?

CHARIS: Yeah, absolutely manipulate them.

SHARON: Yes, versus Peter being about the straight truth.

CHARIS: The pomp and circumstance that surrounds the trial is very interesting.

SHARON: Right, because it takes place in The House of Lords, so there's already all of that.

CHARIS: Yeah, everyone has to wear their robes. The book talks about this complicated process while the investigation is going on. People are going to the king and they have to get permission from the king, or they have to ask the king to appoint a Lord High Steward. The king has to pretend he didn't know they didn't have one. There's so much pageantry involved.

SHARON: Even the paragraph where they're first opening up the proceedings, everything is in all caps. "A Proclamation of Silence from the Sergeant-at-Arms," you know, and "presented the Commission under the Great Seal to the Lord High Steward." And there's a script -- "God save the King!" and all that. I mean, it almost shades on satire? I feel like there's a little bit of poking fun at the tradition but also making really, really clear how out of the ordinary this is. And it's

certainly different from every other case we're ever going to see in Sayers, because it involves the trial of a peer.

CHARIS: But on the other hand, that's the only reason that Peter has enough time to investigate, is that they have to wait for this.

SHARON: [chuckling] Sorry, my book just fell open to this part where Mary's like "Blackmail is so beastly, isn't it?" and I'd written in the margin, "As opposed to murder?" [both laughing]

CHARIS: Well, she does tell Goyles, "I didn't mind thinking you were a murderer, but I do mind you being such an ass!"

SHARON: So I think we've covered most of what we wanted to talk about, and most of what we *can* talk about without describing the whodunnit, so, dear listeners, this is your warning to turn off the podcast if you haven't yet done so. But then come back and rejoin us for the solution!

So, Charis.

CHARIS: Yes.

SHARON: Who is the murderer of Denis Cathcart?

CHARIS: Well, Denis Cathcart is! And you know, Sayers did follow the rules because the possibility of suicide is dangled--

SHARON: Quite heavily

CHARIS: Yeah, at the very beginning. And then we have so many clues, and ooh, there was a third person we find out was Goyles and where was the Duke? Where was this letter? There's running around. There's going to Paris. There's getting stuck in bogs. There's trans-Atlantic flights. But at the end of the day, Denis Cathcart shot himself.

SHARON: Because his heart was broken because Simone left him

CHARIS: Because his heart was broken. And I mentioned earlier that my sister was reading CLOUDS OF WITNESS for the first time, and she was about halfway through, and she was like "If this turns out to be suicide, I'm going to be so mad." [both laughing] And I'm just sitting there like "Well, I don't know! [mutter mutter] I have no idea how this book ends!"

SHARON: Well it must be because she noticed MANON LESCAUT on the nightstand and picked up on the clue!

CHARIS: [laughing] Yes. I didn't know it but she's obviously an expert on French culture.

SHARON: She did better than my husband did, because he was also reading this book for the first time. It's actually his first Wimsey, and I don't actually remember why I decided to give him

this one rather than just making him go in order? But I think he was also slightly deflated that this was in fact a mystery without a murder.

CHARIS: Yeah, which is not something that occurred to me, and I think that has something to do with reader expectations. I feel like this book and this resolution would absolutely not work in a more recent murder mystery. Readers who are coming to this book for the first time, who are used to reading murder mysteries, who have been exposed to detective fiction, I imagine--I guess I don't have much to back this up--but I imagine that this is early days of murder mysteries, as we think of them, right? And so a modern reader with more developed expectations is likely to feel incredibly cheated by this ending. In a way that I think a contemporary reader wouldn't have been.

SHARON: Because it might have felt new or different. Yeah, I also wonder if it's a book that gains more significance when you put it with the rest of the series? Because I was trying to think back to why I suggested to my husband why he start here instead of with WHOSE BODY? Or one of the other ones. And I'm guessing it probably had something to do with the fact that we see so much of Peter's family. And get more of a sense of who he is as a person. I was probably thinking "Oh, once you get to know Peter, then you're gonna be drawn into wanting to read the rest of the books." And for some reason maybe I felt that WHOSE BODY? didn't give enough of that personal touch? Despite the very important fact that we find out about his PTSD, so, past Sharon made a mistake, I suppose!

But you do really learn a lot about Peter's family life and about his siblings and about his mother, and that's what makes it really enjoyable to me as a book as a fan. And I feel like really sets it apart from a lot of other mysteries as detective fiction, right? So Sherlock Holmes has Mycroft, who shows up every now and then. But Miss Marple is a spinster, she's a woman alone. That's what marks her. And I don't remember if any of Poirot's family ever swings by, but it's... I feel like it's actually really rare to read a detective series that centers so much on populating the personal, domestic life of the detective.

I'm thinking of... so D.A. Miller has this great book called THE NOVEL AND THE POLICE that reads Victorian detective fiction through a Foucauldian lens. And one of the ideas that the book puts forward is that the detective is always kind of the outside intrusion into private family life, and the whole point of solving the mystery or the murder is so that that intrusion and the *threat* of that intrusion, the threat of your private self becoming public spectacle gets dissolved. And so I feel like the Wimsey books kind of flip that on its head. He doesn't appear on the scene as this whole complete person, and in fact in this book it's *his* life, his family life that's being disrupted.

CHARIS: Yeah, put in the spotlight.

SHARON: Exactly! And I think even the way that the book ends, where our good friend Inspector Sugg comes across Peter and Parker drunk out of their minds [CHARIS laughs in background], carousing through London... it's funny! But I think that's also the indication of how

much of a toll the case was taking, it was taking on Peter to rein in all his emotions in order to solve the mystery.

CHARIS: Mmm. That's such a funny scene. "Not my taxi. Freddy's taxi! Mustn't take friend's taxi!" It's such a relief to get to that scene after all the high drama of the trial.

SHARON: Yeah. I think all that's left is to kind of wrap up some bits and bobs. We were talking about epigraphs last time and the one for CLOUDS OF WITNESS was kind of opaque to both of us. Maybe we should revisit it?

CHARIS: THE WALLET OF KAI-LUNG.

SHARON: So it says: "The inimitable stories of Tong-king never have any real ending, and this one, being in his most elevated style, has even less end than most of them. But the whole narrative is permeated with the odour of joss-sticks and honourable high-mindedness, and the two characters are both of noble birth." So I guess there's some obvious connections, the nobility aspect, but do you feel like this story has less of an end than most?

CHARIS: Since it ends not with a murderer coming to justice, this book lacks cathartic release the way that other murder mysteries... there is a sense of catharsis, but it doesn't quite follow the pattern that you expect. You're expecting the trial to be this cathartic moment. And it is a little bit, but it gets overshadowed by Grimethorpe showing up and trying to shoot Gerald. And there's this brief and dramatic chase that ends with Grimethorpe being struck and killed by a car.

SHARON: Even the narrative notes that after Peter presents the letter, everything else is anticlimax. And that's a bit meta, I think.

CHARIS: For me the cathartic moment in this book is when Mrs. Grimethorpe goes into a store, her own woman at last.

SHARON: And she notices this blue scarf and says "Well maybe it wouldn't be fitting since I'm a widow" and Peter suggests that she buy it now and wear it later. I really love that one of the final images we have is imagining Mrs. Grimethorpe back with her people in Cornwall and maybe taking off her widow's blacks the moment she gets there and wearing blue and being free.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: So... I think in our notes, we actually both have the same favorite line.

CHARIS: Yes we do.

SHARON: Everyone's sitting at the breakfast table at Riddlesdale Lodge and Parker's there making them uncomfortable. And basically they hear a slight commotion in the hall, and then it

says: "The door waltzed open." And of course it's Peter. And I just *love* that. "The door waltzed open."

CHARIS: Yeah, it's like my armchair. It's so much in just a few words.

SHARON: Exactly! Four words and going back to the efficiency of what Sayers does. It does that like... [sighs, trying to find the words] there's this thing that Hugh Kenner talks about when it comes to James Joyce. It's called "The Uncle Charles Principle." Basically it's a moment where the omniscient third person narrative voice switches focalization to be in a character's perspective, but it also takes on the language that character would use. It's not quite free indirect discourse, it's not stream-of-consciousness, because it's still, there's still the pretense of omniscience and of the narrator being outside of that character's consciousness, but the vocabulary aligning. And I feel like "the door waltzed open" is both something that Peter would think and it aligns with the way that he moves through the world. And... I don't know, it just gives us so much. I just love it.

So I'm sorry I stole yours.

CHARIS: [laughs] It's all right. I am happy to share. My other favorite single little short line is actually a little bit of dialogue from chapter 3. Sir Impey Biggs has been grilling Peter about the investigation. And he knows that Peter is hiding something, because... you know, Peter has been doing his best not to let anyone know that he's worried that Mary's involved in whatever is going on. Because Peter can tell that Mary knows something that she's hiding, and he's trying to keep other people from noticing it. And Impey can tell that *Peter* is hiding something. And so they have this little back and forth. So Impey just says right out, "But whom are *you* screening?" And Wimsey's just like, "You're not paid to ask that sort of question here. Suppose I murdered Cathcart myself--" "You didn't." "I know I didn't, but if I did, I'm not goin' to have you askin' questions and lookin' at me in that tone of voice." [both laughing]

And I just love that "looking at me in that tone of voice." And that's kind of like "the door waltzed open." The door is obviously not waltzing because it's a solid physical door, but the word "waltz" is giving you an impression of both how the door opens, it's being opened quickly, like flung open, and how Wimsey comes in through the door without having to say that. And it's like that with "looking at me in that tone of voice."

SHARON: Yeah, Peter has such a strong... his personality really becomes so distinct in this book, and it starts kind of coloring the world around it too.

CHARIS: And also it's just funny!

SHARON: There's a lot that's very funny in this book. Are you reading anything else great right now?

CHARIS: I am reading *THE MOONSTONE*. [SHARON laughs] I am taking my homework seriously. I went to the library and checked it out. I have begun it. It is thicker than I expected it

to be. I'm still only in the first section and I've met the first of what I presume are going to be multiple narrators. But I'm really enjoying it. It's striking me as really funny and reliant on communication through dialogue. Not quite the same way Sayers does. But because it's written in first person narration and you're getting so much personality through the narration. Especially in this first section where the narrator's kind of this crotchety old man and he is very entertaining. Which caught me off guard, because I'd read WOMAN IN WHITE--

SHARON: [knowingly] Ahhhh

CHARIS: And I think WOMAN IN WHITE, is it one narrator, or primarily one narrator?

SHARON: Yeah, I believe so. And it's just very different in tone.

CHARIS: Right, and it's been a hot minute since I read it, but I think the whole thing is narrated by a young man who's taking himself very seriously. So I was kind of expecting that tone from THE MOONSTONE? And it was kind of a treat to open it up and be like, "Ohhh, this is different!"

SHARON: Turns out Wilkie Collins has a sense of humor!

CHARIS: Yeah! Give me all this unrelated information about all these people. It's very funny. Um, I have a confession. Which is that I don't like Charles Dickens, at all. [SHARON gasps] And I still don't like Dickens, even though people keep trying to explain to me that if I'll just read such-and-such, I will start liking him.

SHARON; [chuckles] I was *about* to say "But if you just read BLEAK HOUSE!"

CHARIS: I know! I could hear it coming!

SHARON: But I shan't, I shan't.

CHARIS: You are not the first person to tell me that if I would just read BLEAK HOUSE.

SHARON: It contains *spontaneous human combustion*, Charis!

CHARIS: Oh, well, I... moving it to the top of the list then! [both laughing] But I did eventually read A CHRISTMAS CAROL? Which did not make me start liking Dickens. I still don't like Dickens. But I was very much surprised when I starting reading A CHRISTMAS CAROL and realized how funny parts of it are. Because there are parts of it that are hilarious! And then it gets super heavy-handed and exhausting by then end. It's like uggggh--

SHARON: [sarcastically] "Yes, we get it. Allegory."

CHARIS: Yeah, please stop hitting me over the head with the allegory. Please. The horse is dead. The horse is very very dead. But especially at the beginning there are parts of



CHRISTMAS CAROL that are so funny and that was a surprise to me! Because I did not think of Dickens in particular or Victorian novels in general as being humorous.

SHARON: I will very womanfully restrain myself from sending you a copy of BLEAK HOUSE, but I *do* think Dickens is at his best comedically in it. And there's an entire description of... I believe it's a painting on a ceiling of Allegory. Like really making fun of heavy-handed allegory. Just anyway. I think it might be up your alley, but far be it from me to tell you what to read beyond THE MOONSTONE.

CHARIS: Someday I will read BLEAK HOUSE and I will let you know exactly what I think about it.

SHARON: Excellent.

CHARIS: I'll tell you why I think I struggle the most with Charles Dickens. One, I tend to find the female characters exhausting. It's just like oh dear, have you ever met a real person once in your life. And the other thing is that I find the way he writes children deeply ludicrous. Have you ever met a real child? It's like "Oh yes, this child was just naturally good and instinctively wants to do the right thing." And I'm just like that's not how children work. Which is not to say that I think children are naturally bad unless you train it out of them, which is a worldview I have heard. But I am saying that children are just small people. They are not naturally more angelic or naturally more demonic or, you know...

SHARON: Than anybody else.

CHARIS: Yeah! It's just like, children are people. But not in Dickens. And any time I try to read Dickens and he's trying to describe a child or has a character that is a child, my eyeballs just roll right out of my head. Can't handle it.

SHARON: Yeah, I think that is a fair assessment, that Mr. Charles Dickens existed in a time where men like him were the most important and did not have to imaginatively put themselves in the shoes of others.

CHARIS: Right, right. To me that really undercuts the whole social change aspect of Dickens. Which I know was an important part of his place in the echelons of literature was the social change that he brought about with his books and the effect he had on culture in general. But the fact that he was calling for social change and taking care of people while also treating people like they were either idiots or angelic idiots or fiendish idiots, just idiots in general. I'm just like, would you please--

SHARON: Not?

CHARIS: Yeah. I'm gonna dump your porridge over your head if you don't. But yes, I am reading THE MOONSTONE and enjoying it much more than I've ever enjoyed anything by Dickens!  
[both laughing]

SHARON: A fair assessment, I think.

And I do think that I see a lot of Sayers in THE MOONSTONE. I can see the Wilkie Collins influence in a way that I did not when I was reading WOMAN IN WHITE. And then other than that, I have just been mainlining romance novels.

SHARON: Excellent!

CHARIS: Yeah, I'm just like this is what convalescent literature is. I'm just getting lost in it and getting to feel emotions about it. You know me, I'm a very emotional reader, I'm a very character-oriented reader. I tend to project a lot onto characters. And so you read a romance novel and if you give yourself over to the narrative, there can be a lot of emotional catharsis, but there's a lot of security because you know there's gonna be a happily ever after, right? Because if there's not one, it's not a romance novel. 'Cause it's breaking the rules. That's very, very firm, no matter how much you mess around within the genre, if there's not a happily ever after, it's not romance. So all kinds of terrible things can happen, and sometimes they do in romance novels, and sometimes you have to suspend disbelief, but no matter how ludicrous this gets or how dramatic this gets or how much you don't see how things can possibly work out, you know that they will, so it's okay.

SHARON: Right. These two people, or two-plus people will find their way back to each other.

CHARIS: It's going to be fine. There's that promise that you're allowed to experience negative emotions because you're gonna be safe at the end. It's a little bit like getting on a rollercoaster. You can flip me upside down because I know that I'm locked in and I'm gonna get off at the end.

SHARON: [nervously] Most likely? Sorry, I have massive anxiety about rollercoasters!

CHARIS: Less of a good example for you!

SHARON: But I get it. I get the idea.

CHARIS: So yeah that's what I've been reading. What about you?

SHARON: Because I took that vacation, I actually got to read a lot for about one week. Because otherwise every spare second when I'm not at work has been taken up with house stuff, which is not great. But one book that I read on my vacation that I really enjoyed is a collection of essays. So the collection is called THICK, and it is by Tressie McMillan Cottom, who is a professor of sociology I believe at Virginia Commonwealth University, but is also a public intellectual who's done a lot of public writing. And it's just... so the book collects both new essays that she wrote for the collection but also revisited some of her old work but did it in a really intriguing way. I've

never really seen this done before, where for a couple of them she kind of took as her starting point, say, "I put out this essay on Taylor Swift appropriating black culture and white beauty standards" and then examines the public response to that. So in that particular essay she was like "I didn't predict that the thing that a lot of people would have a problem with was me saying that I am not beautiful and I can never be beautiful under white beauty standards, because I'm a black woman." And all these people coming out of the woodwork and being like, "No, but you're so pretty!" And she's just like "That's not the point." And then really going through very rigorous analysis of the history of beauty standards and how that intersects or does not with waves of feminism and the black experience of that versus the white experience. Really well done, and every single essay is really good.

And it's very accessible still. There are moments where she breaks down really, really complicated concepts and she doesn't dumb it down, but she's so clear in the way she explains. And I don't know, I feel like something I experienced when I was in academia was there can often be this assumption that a piece of writing that is incomprehensible is thus more intelligent. Like, I don't understand this thing I'm reading, therefore whoever wrote it, spoiler alert, usually dead white guy, must be really, really brilliant. I feel like people just make that assumption all the time, and I love that Dr. McMillan Cottom with all of her writing and especially this collection really explodes that lie. Like no, you can write really, really rigorously, on topics you have intellectual and professional expertise on, in a way that is accessible to a wider public without talking down to anybody, without watering down your ideas at all. It's really exciting. So yeah, that was definitely the best thing I read on vacation.

CHARIS: That sounds awesome.

SHARON: Yeah, so next time I guess we'll be covering UNNATURAL DEATH?

CHARIS: Yes!

SHARON: Which also thematically links up a bit to CLOUDS OF WITNESS. It's also a sort of countryside mystery, very different characters and players though.

CHARIS: And we will introduce one of our very favorite characters from the Wimsey books.

SHARON: Yes! I can't wait.

CHARIS: I'm so excited. I love her. Yes, in two weeks, if all goes well--

SHARON: If we're not felled by more diseases.

CHARIS: Just don't go on the moor without your shawl

SHARON: I'll do my best.

CHARIS: But yes! In two weeks we'll be back with our first episode on UNNATURAL DEATH.

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

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

Sharon: See you next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC gradually fades out]