

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 5 transcript

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

SHARON: Hello, and welcome to As My Wimsey Takes Me! I'm Sharon Hsu--

CHARIS: And I'm Charis Ellison. Today we're discussing the first half of UNNATURAL DEATH, the third Peter Wimsey novel.

SHARON: In this book, Lord Peter is investigating what he calls the perfect crime, where there is no evidence that a crime even occurred at all.

[the sound of a car engine sputtering and revving to life, then speeding away quickly while a crow caws in the distance]

SHARON: So Charis, let's give our listeners a little bit of background, given that we often talk about everything but the crime [CHARIS laughs] and not everybody is reviewing the source material maybe as closely as we are, but we started off by saying that Lord Peter calls this 'the perfect crime', and would you mind explaining what he means by that?

CHARIS: So, yeah, this book opens with Peter Wimsey and Charles Parker having dinner together in a restaurant, and just having a conversation about a poisoning case, a historical one, and someone overhears their conversation about 'oh, someone should have realized that this poisoning was going on', and they meet a young man who's a young doctor, who tells them a story about his own experience, about how doctors have to be very cautious about revealing their suspicions. And the story that he tells them is a little bit complicated, but he had an elderly patient who was dying of cancer, who died suddenly--you know, despite her illness he had expected her to live for another six months, and she dies suddenly, and he doesn't understand, and he asks for a post mortem, and the result of his diligence and caution is that he becomes the subject of a tremendous amount of gossip, he starts losing clients, his practice falls apart, and he has to move away and try and find another living as a doctor. And when he gives the details of the case, which include the fact that there's no clear cause of death, you know his patient officially died of heart failure but he's like 'there wasn't a clear cause for the heart failure', and there are suspicious circumstances, where she was a very wealthy woman, and no one could get her to write a will because she was afraid of death, and her only living relative is her niece who kept insisting that her aunt was on the verge of death, even though the doctor was sure that she wasn't. And all these things really catch Lord Peter's interest, and so Lord Peter is just like 'I'm going to investigate this.'

SHARON: What could possibly go wrong!

CHARIS: What could possibly go wrong? And so despite the doctor--his name isn't given at any point in the first couple of chapters--despite the fact that he says 'no, no, I don't think you need to investigate--'

SHARON: And it's been a couple of years, at that point, right?

CHARIS: Right, it's been I think three years.

SHARON: So he's like, it's in the past--

CHARIS: Yeah, he's like 'it's in the past, I don't want to get into any more trouble, but Lord Peter--like, this book makes a point of reminding us that Lord Peter is a deeply curious person, and his desire to investigate things is driven by that curiosity, he's just like 'I am too interested to drop this.'

SHARON: He says at one point to Parker, 'I think this is the case I've been waiting for my entire career as an amateur detective.'

CHARIS: Yeah, he calls it 'the case of cases', yes, he has a whole speech about it in chapter 8. So, Lord Peter is convinced that there has been a murder, he's convinced that the niece did it, and he is convinced that if he can dig up the people involved and poke around, that he will get the murderer to make a mistake, so that they can find not only proof that she's the murderer, but proof that a murder happened.

SHARON: Mmhm. And I think one of the puzzling aspects that the doctor brings up, which we should also mention, is that in terms of opportunity, it seems like really only the niece possibly had an opportunity to create circumstances where heart failure was possible? But it also doesn't benefit her, because the aunt had always told her, you know, 'I'm not gonna make a will, but you're gonna get everything', so you know, it's not one of those cases where she needed to pre-empt a will being made, or--

CHARIS: Right, there wasn't any hint that the aunt was going to leave the money somewhere else, there was no one else for her to leave it to, and so, why on earth would she have a motive to murder her aunt, if she can't wait six months for this tremendous amount of money? Like, you know, she's going to get it all soon.

SHARON: Mmhm, no reason to bring murder into the equation, it seems.

MITHRIL [in the background]: Mrrreeeow! [translation: FEED ME]

CHARIS: Yeah. So, that's the set up for this mystery.

SHARON: Yeah. I guess it's interesting to me that this is one of the first of kind of several inheritance plot mysteries, right? That we get. So, UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, which we'll be reading next, also revolves around a plot about a will, and about inheritance. And--is STRONG POISON--?

CHARIS: Yeah, STRONG POISON deals with, like inheritance comes up as a question. Really, so does--it also comes up in HAVE HIS CARCASE?

SHARON: Oh yeah, that's right, yeah. So it's really, I mean Sayers, I think, is picking up in a lot of ways on that most Victorian of tropes, right? [CHARIS laughs] Like, somebody's gonna die and where are they gonna leave their money?

CHARIS: As Sayers has Peter say in UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, "People so often lose their heads when will are involved."

SHARON: It's very true. You know, this follows up on that other Victorian, tropey book of CLOUDS OF WITNESS, though I think there's, you know, maybe there's a lot more that feels contemporary to the moment in this book, I think?

CHARIS: I mean, the plot hinges on certain things that we can't, I think, go into too much at the moment, for spoiler reasons, but there're more contemporary references in this book than I think in just any of the other books.

SHARON: Well and I'm also thinking specifically of how many spinsters and single women show up?

CHARIS: Mmhm.

SHARON: That was certainly, you know, in some ways a concern after World War I, where a generation of men died, right, this question or this problem of surplus women.

CHARIS: It was even a problem before World War I, I looked this up to double check, and people were concerned about the disparity between the population of men and women beginning in, basically the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, right? And it kind of hinged on that idea that 'oh, women are going out to work, they aren't at home raising children', and so the fact that women outnumber men, and also women are not "doing their job" of producing more people, it was just causing, there was a little bit of panic, people were concerned, people were writing opinion pieces about it.

SHARON: Of course they were.

CHARIS: Of course they were. And, you know, certainly after so many men died in World War I, it became much more of a mainstream concern, and--I mean, it is true that, you know, there

were lots of women who would have probably married, that's the life route they would have chosen, and it just was no longer an option for them because there was no one for them to marry.

SHARON: Right. It's so interesting to me, too, because I believe this is the first book that Sayers composes and publishes after she herself married? And there's been quite a lot written about her marriage as one of, you know, maybe not being entirely between intellectual equals, or that her husband, who was a journalist, once she started becoming really famous for the Lord Peter books, was resentful that she was carrying the family financially, so it's interesting to me that she has so many--that this book contains so many single women, kind of at this crucial juncture of her life, where she's had the unhappy interest in John Cournos, she's had the failed love affair with Bill White, and given birth to an illegitimate son, and now she's finally married, but she's clearly still really really grappling with this question of what are the options available to women, I think? Especially if they choose not to go the traditional route?

CHARIS: Yeah, because we really have a whole range of women in different circumstances, and that seems like a good introduction to one of our favorite characters--

SHARON: Yes!

CHARIS: --in all of the Lord Peter Wimsey books!

SHARON: Yes! We get to talk about Miss Climpson this episode!

CHARIS: We love Miss Climpson!

SHARON: And I was just--I was so, like really chuckling to myself re-reading this bit. So right after Peter gets this case that doesn't seem to be a case dropped in his lap, he's like 'oh, yes, Charles, I would really like to introduce you to somebody in my life' and there's just paragraph after paragraph where Parker thinks he's being taken to see Peter's mistress [CHARIS laughing in the background] and he's trying to be such a good sport about it, and you know, be really open-minded, but he's so embarrassed?

CHARIS: He's so embarrassed! I love the line where it says that "Parker was not sure he liked it. He conducted his own life with an earnest middle-class morality, which he owed to his birth and upbringing." So he's just like 'mmmm this is not my thing, but okay....'

SHARON: Right, and at some point Peter says "Of course there's nothing new under the sun, but of course all those wives and porcupines, as the child said, must have soured his disposition a little," and Parker just responds "Quite", but the narrative says "'Poor fish,' he added to himself, 'they always seem to think it's different.'" [both laughing] So I think Peter is like very knowingly poking him a little bit, it's just so funny.

CHARIS: Yeah, Peter is just rambling along--although I think, you know right after that bit that you just mentioned, Peter is just rambling, and he's talking about "Outlet, everybody needs an outlet, you can't really blame people if it's just that they need an outlet, they can't help it, I think it's much kinder to give them an outlet than to make fun of them in books--and after all, it isn't very difficult to write books--" [SHARON laughs] Which, the quote that's at the beginning of this chapter, Chapter 3, which is called 'A Use for Spinsters', the quote is "There are two million more females than males in England and Wales! And this is an awe-inspiring circumstance." Which is from Gilbert Frankau, who was a popular novelist of the time, and I--

SHARON: Hmmmm.

CHARIS: I wonder if this line is just a little jab, a little jab at him.

SHARON: So they arrive at the ostensible mistress's flat, and who do they discover instead?

CHARIS: They meet Miss Climpson! Who is an elderly spinster, elderly but energetic, deeply religious, Roman Catholic--oh she's so delightful, I love her so much. And we learn that Peter hasn't been keeping her as his mistress, he's been keeping her as an inquiry agent.

SHARON: Yeah, she's essentially like a Baker Street Irregular, for people who are familiar with Sherlock Holmes, right, one of the people that he can send out on his behalf into situations where he wouldn't be the appropriate person to follow a line of inquiry? Kind of similarly I think to how we were saying, in an earlier episode, he always sends Bunter to talk to servants, right? Because they wouldn't tell him what he needs to know.

CHARIS: Yeah, Peter tells Parker that Miss Climpson is his--what does he say? "My eyes, my ears, and especially my nose." And he talks about "People want questions asked. Whom do they send? A man with large flat feet and a note-book--the sort of man whose private life is conducted in a series of inarticulate grunts. I send a lady with a long woolly, jumper on knitting needles and jingly things round her neck. Of course she asks questions--everyone expects it. Nobody is surprised. Nobody is alarmed." He's just like 'yes I want to know things, and who do I send? A nosy old lady.'

SHARON: It's very, she's very Miss Marple-esque in that sense. I also feel like, just in her pattern of speech? She's very long-winded, she uses a lot of italics--

CHARIS: Yes, her letters have many exclamations points and underlining--

SHARON: I feel like she's really modeled after that greatest of literary spinsters, Miss Bates, from Jane Austen's EMMA?

CHARIS: Oh yes, I can see that for sure.

SHARON: So Peter goes to Miss Climpson, and basically charges her with going to that village where the country doctor was practicing and just scouting out, and seeing what she can find out, and seeing what people might tell her about these kind of suspicious circumstances from a couple years ago.

CHARIS: Which--to interrupt you with facts, because I'm fact-checking--

SHARON: Okay!

CHARIS: Interestingly, Miss Marple made her first appearance in the same year--

SHARON: Oh!

CHARIS: Miss Marple's first appearance was in a short story published in *The Royal Magazine* in December of 1927, which is the same year that UNNATURAL DEATH was published.

SHARON: Interesting! So spinsters were in the air.

CHARIS: Mmhm, and also everywhere else in the country, because there were many of them [both laugh], which if our listeners are interested in learning more about that, we don't need to go into too much depth ourselves because the Shedunnit podcast has done it for us, and we'll include a link to that in our show notes for a full episode that talks more about that whole situation.

SHARON: Of surplus women.

CHARIS: Yes.

SHARON: Speaking of fact-checking, Charis--

CHARIS: Yes!

SHARON: --because we've received quite a few emails about this--

CHARIS: So many people emailed us to do math at us!

SHARON: Yes, and I would beg the excuse of our two and a half English degrees, but I don't actually want to play into the stereotype that we are thus bad at math [CHARIS laughing in the background] we just decided to do no research when we made our claim? But! I was noticing when Peter is telling Miss Climpson what he thinks her persona should be when she goes to the village, he says "Don't be wealthy, because wealthy people don't inspire confidence," but "you should be a retired lady in very easy circumstances," and he says she should oblige him by living at the rate of about 800 pounds a year, which from her reaction we can tell is quite a bit above her income, and a very comfortable kind of upper-middle class income, but all of that to say--we do have to give a mea culpa for our very blithe #JusticeforBunter hashtag, because as many astute listeners have pointed

out to us, the rate of inflation for various goods and living expenses has obviously not--is sort of unevenly applied? So just because we calculated Bunter's 200 pounds a year in today's dollars, it obviously was much cheaper to rent a flat in London at the time, as we know from Parker's 1 pound a week flat, and so forth, so yes, we take the point.

CHARIS: Yes, although as I think one of our listeners said on Twitter, Bunter *does* still deserve swimming pools of money!

SHARON: I really liked what one of our reviewers suggested, which was that maybe Peter pays Bunter 200 pounds a year solely to keep his opinions to himself? On top of a very, very generous salary.

CHARIS: [laughing] On top of many more dollars! Or many more pounds, excuse me. Yes, but swimming pools of money is what Bunter truly deserves.

SHARON: Yes [laughing]. We're very delighted that everybody wanted to defend him, and also I guess to defend Peter's honor as an employer.

CHARIS: [laughing] Yes, Peter is a caring and generous employer, and please don't do math at us anymore [both laughing] I'm not afraid to be an English major who doesn't do math.

SHARON: So Miss Climpson is the first spinster we meet. When she gets to the village we meet some more, not necessarily spinsters but single women, because again this book is full of them, and most significantly she meets the niece of the woman that Peter suspects was murdered.

CHARIS: Yes, Miss Agatha Dawson, and the niece is Miss Whittaker. And so Miss Climpson has gone to a vicarage work party--

SHARON: Yeah, and she sort of finagles the conversation and finagles an introduction. Now do you think--so I think Sayers does some really interesting things with names in this book? So the niece is Mary Whittaker, which I feel like is almost a--I don't know, I'm curious if you also read it as a little bit of a reference to Mary Wimsey, from the last book?

CHARIS: I...that is not something that ever occurred to me, I think I just went 'ah yes, the name Mary, so common--' [SHARON laughs] '--such a common name, so popular' and didn't think anything of it.

SHARON: There is, yeah, there is a certain amount of realism in that, like, probably names should appear more than once.

CHARIS: Yeah, but the shared initials--you know, now that it's been pointed out to me--we talked about how Mary had very limited choices, but at the same time she was from a background of privilege, and she had certain privileges even when she was being controlled by other people's choices.

SHARON: And specifically being controlled through financial means.

CHARIS: Right. Whereas Mary Whittaker, she's a young woman who had a career, she was a nurse, and we get the impression that she was a very good nurse, that she had a solid career that she gave up to come and live with Miss Dawson, with the understanding that she would then inherit all this money. So I don't know, like I don't know if--I think you could certainly make a very interesting argument about it as a way of paralleling maybe their lives and their options.

SHARON: Well, I mean in typical English-major form [both laugh] I'm much less interested in if Sayers meant to do it or not? If there's like a diary entry that's like 'ooh I'm going to pull out this theme by making the character names rhyme' or whatever, and moreso that there is a way to, I think, put those two things side by side and to read these two books together as a kind of long meditation on the options available to women, and how class and circumstance maybe affect, you know, their outcomes differently.

CHARIS: In many ways the majority of Sayers' books can be read as part of that meditation, you know? And obviously there are some of them where there are fewer women at the center, but I'm just sitting here staring at the books on my shelf in front of me, and looking at the titles, and going 'yes, that one, kind of has--', even when it's just slight, even when it's just in the background, almost all of them have that somewhere.

SHARON: Right. I mean, even Miss Climpson really, in some ways, hangs a lampshade on it in this book. Even when she's first introduced to Parker, she says something about how her father didn't believe in education for women?

CHARIS: Oh yeah, she says she 'would have liked a good education', but her 'dear father didn't believe in it' for women.

SHARON: Right, and she says "very old fashioned you young people would think him", so she acknowledges in some ways that that's at this point in time a kind of old fashioned belief, women were much more widely educated, at least in kind of the primary level. But also women were starting to enter professions, like there's three--three nurses show up in this book. There's Mary Whittaker, who was a nurse and gave up nursing to stay with Agatha Dawson, there's Nurse Philliter, who is the nurse who was initially taking care of Miss Dawson, and who the young country doctor was engaged too, and she was dismissed by Mary Whittaker. And then there was a third nurse who was brought in--

CHARIS: Yes, Nurse Forbes, I think.

SHARON: So there's definitely, kind of pointing to the fact that because of the war a lot of women enter the nursing profession, and that that was one of the professional paths--nursing and teaching were two professions that saw a lot of women enter their ranks in this period. I also, I just [laughs] gotta say that when the young doctor is talking about Nurse Philliter, he's like 'oh yes, she's extremely looking forward to helping me with my practice, once we get married' [CHARIS laughs] and I just drew angry faces all around that line.

CHARIS: [laughs] He's a little bit, a little bit of a pill.

SHARON: Mmhm.

CHARIS: Yeah, one thing that I noted, you know I was going through and conscientiously putting post-it notes, with notes, so that I'd be able to find things like this again, because my own sister, my own flesh and blood, criticised me for going, 'you know who say things a lot, and then forget to tell us if you were right about where it was--'

SHARON: [laughing] Check the show notes, listeners!

CHARIS: Yes, always check the show notes to see if Charis was right about anything that she said! But, something that I noticed is how frequently, when characters are giving Lord Peter the story--because, you know he talks to multiple different people, and he kind of hears the story of Agatha Dawson from several perspectives, and pretty much every time, the person who's telling him the story talks about how so-and-so isn't very bright, right? So, Dr. Carr tells the story in the first couple of chapters, and he talks about Miss Dawson, 'she's tough and had a strong constitution, but she wasn't very bright'. And he goes and he talks to Nurse Philliter, and she's telling him about the maids--I think it's Agnes and Bertha?

SHARON: Bertha and Evelyn Gotobed, speaking of interesting names!

CHARIS: Yeah, Bertha and Evelyn Gotobed, and Nurse Philliter is like 'mm they weren't very bright, they were obliging but not very bright.' And later on we meet one of the sisters, after the other sister has been murdered--

SHARON: Gone-to-bed permanently.

CHARIS: Yes. Bertha Gotobed is murdered, and later on her sister Evelyn returns from Canada, where she has gone and become Mrs. Cropper, and she is giving Lord Peter her version of the story, and she talks about how her sister was not as bright as she was, and so I'm just like--everyone--it's just this ongoing theme where everyone is looking at the world and going 'oh yes, so and so is not as smart as I am'.

SHARON: And especially ranking women in that way.

CHARIS: Yeah! And I thought that that was interesting, because in so many of those stories--none of the people that I just listed are sinister, right? Dr. Carr is a bit of a pill, but he's not sinister, he don't suspect him of being the murderer. Nurse Philliter, she kind of appears as a positive character. Evelyn Gotobed, who becomes Mrs. Cropper, you know, she seems like a positive character. So like--this isn't something that's being presented as a negative or sinister trait, but on the other hand we're dealing with a murderer who is heavily relying on other people being not as smart as they are. So, I don't know--and like, I don't even know if that is something that--in some ways that just feels like a study of how people really talk?

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: You know, that everyone is going through life, thinking that they're the smartest person in the room. Unless you're in a room with the detective in it. But, especially, you know, so often when you're telling a story to someone else about a situation, that urge is to portray yourself as being the clever one. And--yeah, I just felt, you know, and we get so many wonderful, very funny scenes of Miss Climpson coaxing people into gossiping, and the way that people gossip and talk about each other, and you kind of see people subtly putting each other down, and subtly putting each other in their place, and all those little kind of social machinations that [laughing] that keep life juicy.

SHARON: [laughs] Gossip plays such a huge role in this book, right? It's really--

CHARIS: Very important.

SHARON: Yeah, they're so reliant on gossip to even put pieces of the case together, because it's far enough in the past that you can't dig up the body, you can't pull everyone in to be interviewed, Peter has to be really--it's like the first inquiry that he's been involved with that he can't really involve the police at first. Speaking of gossip, and women, shall we discuss the portrayal of Mary Whittaker and Vera Findlater? As well as kind of the gossip around Miss Dawson?

CHARIS: Yeah. It's--I'm not quite sure how to lead into this--

SHARON: Just the meme, 'They're lesbians, Harold' [both laugh] but not, like as we talked with Mo Moulton about, we don't want to just assign 21st century labels, but I think--certainly in like the reception history of this book, the tendency is to read Mary Whittaker as a butch lesbian.

CHARIS: Right, which I am not--you know, reading the book myself, I don't think that I ever read Mary Whittaker as actually a lesbian?

SHARON: Yeah, I'm not convinced myself, either.

CHARIS: There's a scene that I don't think comes up in the first half of the book, so this may be a slight spoiler for those who are reading along, but there is a scene where Mary Whittaker interacts with a man, and she's obviously repulsed by physical intimacy? And--like I'm tempted to read that as she was a sex-repulsed asexual, but, I mean, speaking as a woman on the asexual spectrum myself, I don't find her a very flattering portrayal. And, like, who knows if she's intended to be a portrayal of anything at all? In terms of sexuality, at least. I think she's a very deliberate portrayal of a relationship between women that has a power imbalance, regardless of whether there's sexuality involved. But whether she's intended to be a portrait of a lesbian or a portrait of another sexuality, I feel like there's not sufficient evidence to show.

SHARON: Right, yeah. And I think Miss Climpson and the narrative are both very--they both condemn the way that Mary Whittaker uses the sort of admiration bordering on obsession that Vera Findlater has for her? Like it's--the power imbalance that you're mentioning is very much whether Vera wants to be best friends with Mary, wants to be lovers, has a bit of a schoolgirl 'pash' as they

would call it, and whether that had a sexual component or not, it's very clear in the narrative that Mary doesn't reciprocate these feelings at anywhere near the same intensity that Vera has, but she's perfectly willing to kind of accept the worship?

CHARIS: Yeah, and make use of it.

SHARON: Yeah, and I think given what we know about Sayers and about her set and her belief that before anything men and women shouldn't be judged as genders, but as humans, I do think that she--like, if it were a male character doing this to a female character, it would be just as much condemned, right, because the whole point is that it's not right to treat people as things, it's not right to use people's emotions or their passions against them.

CHARIS: I wanted to look at, in the beginning--chapter 8 opens with one of Miss Climpson's verbose letters to Lord Peter--

SHARON: Oh her letters! Let's talk about her letters.

CHARIS: Her letters are DELIGHTFUL! But she writes Lord Peter a letter that's included at the beginning of chapter 8 where she is telling him the facts as she's learned them so far, and she's telling him about the relationship between Miss Findlater, who's kind of the youngest daughter of a large family, you get the impression, so Miss Findlater has attached herself to Miss Whittaker, who is obviously much older. And Miss Climpson says that "Miss Findlater has evidently quite a 'pash', as we used to call them at school, for Miss Whittaker, and I'm afraid none of us are above being flattered by such outspoken admiration. I must say I think it rather unhealthy, you may remember Miss Clemence Dane's very clever book on the subject. I have seen so much of that kind of thing in my rather woman-ridden existence. It has such a bad effect, as a rule, upon the weaker character of the two." Which I think is interesting, and I looked up Clemence Dane, and I think that what Miss Climpson is referencing is a book from 1917 called REGIMENT OF WOMEN, which is a novel that I didn't have a chance to get my hands on it before we recorded, so for our listeners who are more knowledgeable maybe they'll have additional comments, but I looked up the Wikipedia summary to get a quick idea of the reference, and it seems like what it's most known for is being a veiled treatment of lesbianism in a private school setting? And the plot summary very briefly is there's a relationship between two women who teach at a private school, and one of them is very clearly controlling the relationship, and like they're very close, and a little bit codependent, and then the younger, vulnerable one has a break down, and a relative gets her to leave the school and go to the country, where she meets a nice young man, and then she goes back to the school, and returns to her friend that she's had this close friendship with, and realizes that that person has been treating her badly the whole time, and leaves to go marry the nice young man. So like, not having read it, and not having read any studies of it or anything, I don't know whether it's a matter of...you know, a disappointing portrayal of 'curing' lesbianism, or whether it really works as a portrayal of a friendship that's gone wrong?

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: My impression, just from reading the Wikipedia, is that it's kind of like this situation, like is it a codependent friendship, or are they lesbians, Harold?

SHARON: Kind of wrapping back to that question of homosocial spaces that we had early on about, often the assumption at the time being that same-gender friendships were--could go deeper, than opposite gender--

CHARIS: That it was perfectly normal and common to have very intimate friendships with people of the same gender.

SHARON: Exactly, and like we know in Sayers' own letters when she went away to school, and when she was at Oxford, she would come home to her parents and say 'Oh I've developed such a pash for Miss So-and-so, I was so pleased when she asked me to start addressing her by her Christian name' and so forth, and at no point is anyone, including Sayers, including her parents, at all raising the question of whether she's a lesbian, it's like 'oh yeah, of course, you're at school, you're with these other women all the time, of course you're going to have intense relationships.' But I do, I think, certainly for the critics who say that the book, that Mary Whittaker if she is written as a kind of depiction of a butch lesbian, it is a fraught and damaging depiction? And I think, I'm certainly not the first person to make this observation, that it is important that there is another depiction in this book of a long-term, most likely lesbian relationship, romantic relationship, between Miss Dawson and her friend Clara Whittaker, who was actually Mary Whittaker's aunt, that they were long-term partners. I think, you know, there's still something stereotypical about it, one of them was the more handsome one, who rode horses, who could talk like a man about horses, and then the other one was like--

CHARIS: The domestic partner.

SHARON: But, I mean, they're spoken of very admiringly by everyone that Miss Climpson meets, certainly nobody implies that they were abnormal, or that there was anything sort of sinister about them, people in this book treat that very much as 'oh yes, of course Clara Whittaker left all her money to Agatha Dawson when she died, because Agatha Dawson was the most important person in the world to her.'

CHARIS: Yeah, and you know a little bit later in the book, Peter and Parker go to the town where Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson lived, and meet an elderly couple who were familiar with them, and they talk about them so lovingly. They talk about 'our Miss Whittaker' and 'our Miss Dawson'.

SHARON: Even this part where--so it's still Chapter 8, but Miss Climpson is writing to Peter and telling him for the first time about Miss Dawson and Miss Whittaker, she's recounting it and talking about how Charles Whittaker, who is Clara's brother, and whom Miss Climpson says is 'the father of 'our Miss Whittaker', i.e. Mary Whittaker, resented very much not getting her money, and even though he was a clergyman he 'kept up the feud in a very unChristian manner', and it's interesting to me that she writes "but of course he inherited the bad old-fashioned idea that women ought not to be their own mistresses or make money for themselves, or do what they liked with their own", and I think--"bad old fashioned idea", that's exactly the language that she used when she said that her father didn't want to give her an education, because he thought women shouldn't be educated. And I

also think--I think there must be a double meaning, right? 'Women ought not to be their own mistresses'--there's both the idea of being the master of your own fate, commanding your own destiny, controlling your own money, and then also that women should not be the mistresses of women, I think that it's sort of a veiled reference there. But he's very much--I mean, Miss Climpson is writing that this is kind of a wrong or an old-fashioned point of view.

CHARIS: Well speaking of, again of Miss Climpson, to have a slightly tortured segue--[SHARON chuckles]--you know, Miss Climpson is good at finding things out because she's a nosy old lady, and we've talked about how gossipy old women know everything. We've also talked about how servants always know everything, and Peter, having found out from his interview with Nurse Philliter, who was the first nurse to work for Agatha Dawson, he learns from her that the maids were dismissed and replaced around the time that she herself was let go?

SHARON: Right, so he's like 'that's suspicious', that Mary Whittaker wanted to turn over the entire household staff.

CHARIS: Yeah, and so he's just like 'those maids saw something that they shouldn't have', and so he puts an ad in the paper, to see if he can--basically he's shaking trees to see what falls out? So he places an ad in the paper for 'Bertha and Evelyn Gotobed, formerly in the service of Agatha Dawson', and they're requested to communicate with 'J.Murbles, Solicitor, of Staple Inn, when they will hear of something to their advantage', and Parker really thinks that Peter is--he kind of thinks that Peter is making a fool of himself and there's not really a case here, and Parker says "but stick in the ad in by all means, it can't do any harm."

SHARON: [sighs the deep sigh of someone who knows how much harm it can do]

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: Dear innocent Parker. Dear innocent Peter, playing with people's lives. Because what happens?

CHARIS: What happens is that Bertha Gotobed is found dead in Epping Forest.

SHARON: Of unknown causes. And conveniently, Mary Whittaker has an alibi, so that throws a wrench into Peter's...

CHARIS: Suspicious.

SHARON: Yeah, but moreover it really raises for the first time for us as readers, right? If Peter's--like, we've talked about this a few times, how he sometimes has this moment in investigations where he's not sure if he should keep on going, and that's sort of the vocational difference between him and Charles, right? Is that he's doing it for fun, and Charles as a policeman has a duty to pursue every lead. And I think that this is really a point in the series where because of Peter's actions, because of his curiosity and his adherence to finding the truth, which I think we are

supposed to find admirable, but because of all these things, his actions lead directly to the death of an innocent person.

CHARIS: Right. And, it's very clear that he is not necessarily putting this ad in because he thinks the maids will be able to tell him anything specific or concrete, right? His goal is to shake up the murderer. He has this conversation with Charles at the beginning of chapter 6, which is before they hear about Bertha Gotobed's death, and this is where Peter talks about how criminals can't leave well enough alone? He and Parker are kind of arguing a little bit about whether this is a real case. Peter's talking about 'I shall use up to date psychological methods. Like the people in the Psalms, I lay traps, I catch men. I shall let the alleged criminal convict herself.' And he talks about how murderers 'take unnecessary steps to cover the traces they haven't left', and so that's his goal with this advertisement, is to make her go 'oh, someone knows something, and so I need to do more to cover up my crimes.' And someone does do something, because Bertha Gotobed turns up dead.

SHARON: And I mean, to be fair to Peter, his response is "God forgive me, Charles, I feel like a murderer."

CHARIS: Yeah. It's--I hate innocent people dying, in--like, it's one thing to be reading a mystery and the innocent person is already dead, but when innocent people die in the course of the investigation, I'm like 'ugh, I feel bad about it!'

SHARON: And when it's brought on by the detective, who is our hero--

CHARIS: Right, the detective that we're supposed to be rooting for, the detective that in some ways the reader's--

SHARON: Stand-in?

CHARIS: Right, I was going to say avatar but that doesn't quite fit. But the reader's stand-in, it's like 'what responsibility does he have'. Which it certainly does not feel right to say no responsibility, I'm inclined to say a lot of responsibility, which--like, we could have a very long, drawn-out, ethical discussion about who takes responsibility, but the thing is that everyone takes responsibility for their own actions, and so Lord Peter can't take responsibility for the actions of the murderer, but he is responsible for his own actions in putting this ad in the paper, even though it was with the best of intentions. Because his goal was to shake up a murderer, his goal was to make a murderer act, and what action did he think a murderer was going to take?

SHARON: Other than murder! Right.

CHARIS: Other than murder! It's in the name!

SHARON: I mean he does, when Bertha Gotobed's sister, Evelyn, now Mrs. Cropper, shows up to--because they still need to get the piece of information, right, that can be provided by these two sisters--Peter does go to every length to make sure that she's gonna be safe.

CHARIS: Right, he's very careful to meet her, and to have her surrounded by people from the moment she gets off the ship.

SHARON: Mmhmm, shadowed by police, and...

CHARIS: And he also mentions something to Parker about how Murbles has not left his rooms, since the ad went in. That Mr. Murbles, the solicitor who is named in the ad, has been taking precautions.

SHARON: Right, because Peter--I think Peter was expecting that the murderer would maybe go after Mr. Murbles? As the person who's like 'come to me for an interesting thing'.

CHARIS: Right, and it did not occur to him that the murderer would go after the maids to silence them, which is a huge oversight on his part, and like to his credit he feels a tremendous amount of guilt about it, and I think it's kind of telling that he doesn't pull this stunt again, I don't think, in any subsequent books?

SHARON: Yeah, I don't think so--at least not like this.

CHARIS: I think he becomes more cautious as a result. But, Bertha Gotobed is still dead.

SHARON: Yeah [sighing heavily]

CHARIS: I think that UNNATURAL DEATH is very good as a mystery, I think it's very interesting, I think it's very complicated, I think that it's a very tight, you know, it's very tightly plotted. But in terms of the character development, I always--it's not my favorite book to read? Because I find the extra deaths--as you mentioned on Twitter, there's a lot of murder in this book!

SHARON: Just murders piling up everywhere!

CHARIS: So! Many! The body count keeps going up!

SHARON: Almost to the point where it starts feeling a little bit absurd.

CHARIS: Right, and I'm like--I don't enjoy that! At all!

SHARON: And it's a lot of murdered of women, which I never enjoy, so.

CHARIS: Right, I don't care for that. So...yeah, when I'm introducing people to the Lord Peter Wimsey books, it's very rare for me to suggest that they start with WHOSE BODY? Even though it's the first chronologically, I don't think it's the strongest book, I don't think it's the easiest access point, and a lot of times I either suggest that they start with STRONG POISON, because I think that they'll love the series most if they meet it through Harriet Vane, or I suggest that they start with UNNATURAL DEATH.

SHARON: Oh, interesting!

CHARIS: And I'm kind of like, sitting here questioning that decision [SHARON laughs], and I can--like, I suggest UNNATURAL DEATH because I think that it's a strong mystery, and I think that the extravagance of murders is less upsetting when you're less invested in Peter as a character?

SHARON: Mm, and his moral development.

CHARIS: Right, and I don't think that CLOUDS OF WITNESS is a good entry point because you need to be invested in Peter to be invested in that mystery?

SHARON: Right, and oops, as we talked about last time... [both laugh] I think I also used STRONG POISON, I suggest MURDER MUST ADVERTISE a lot because I think it's one of the best mysteries, but...

CHARIS: Yeah, I don't like to suggest MURDER MUST ADVERTISE because you don't meet Peter as himself immediately.

SHARON: Mm, that's a good point.

CHARIS: Yeah, so I tend not to recommend that. But like, why don't I recommend UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB to people? Why don't I--I know why I don't recommend FIVE RED HERRINGS [both laugh] because of the TRAINS!

SHARON: We don't care for trains!

CHARIS: I mean, I love trains as a passenger, but time tables and trains and oh my goodness...

SHARON: Yeah, you know maybe now that we've, now that you and I have revisited WHOSE BODY? And kind of one a really deep dive, I might start just telling people to start from the beginning--and listen to the podcast [laughs]. Because I think, in my mind it was always--I always kind of thought 'oh yeah, it's the first, it's a little lighter weight', but now having devoted multiple hours to thinking about it, I'm like oh no, we actually get quite a lot.

CHARIS: Yeah, as my--[chuckles] I gave it to my brother to read, and he was just like 'I'm having trouble getting into this book. It's not easy reading for an anarchist.' [both laugh]

SHARON: [laughing] Oh no, yeah, here's this fop of an aristocrat, just like swanning off, paying hundreds of pounds for old manuscripts, I can't imagine what he took issue with!

CHARIS: I cannot, I cannot imagine what he--I'm going to look what he actually said--oh yes, he says "Now I remember why I stopped reading WHOSE BODY? after five pages, and it's because my gut reaction to Wimsey was to start singing La Carmagnole [apologies to our French speaking listeners for the butchered pronunciation]. I'm powering through but as openings go it's rough on an anarchist."

[both laugh]

SHARON: Did he end up liking it anymore, after powering through?

CHARIS: He did! He told me that he turned a corner after he got to the parts about theology and PTSD. "Before that point the only ones I related to in the book were the caricatures of Lord Peter." [SHARON laughs] And to both things I was like 'That's fair.'

SHARON: Yeah can't, can't really argue with that.

CHARIS: Yeah, I can't fault that. But he did end up enjoying the book, and he did end up enjoying the podcast!

SHARON: [gasps] Aaw! Thanks, members of Charis' family, who are all listening to the podcast!

CHARIS: Yes, shout out to my siblings! At least two of them. [laughs] You're my favorites, don't tell the others.

SHARON: So, to pull us back just a tiny bit, to this particular book--

CHARIS: Oh, did we want to talk about *this* book? [laughing]

SHARON: [laughs] So I guess a brief teaser, possibly, for next time, is that the evidence that Bertha Gotobed dies for does complicate things a bit, right? The straightforwardness of the mystery becomes a bit more complex because, what her sister ends up telling Peter, is that the two of them were called in at one point to very underhandedly witness a will that Mary Whittaker was trying to get her aunt Miss Dawson to sign. So it was this whole thing where she had set up a screen, where the two maids could see Miss Dawson but she couldn't see them, and Mary had kind of shuffled a will in among a bunch of papers--

CHARIS: Or presumably a will.

SHARON: Presumably, yes.

CHARIS: But a document that needed to be witnessed by two people who were in the same room as the person signing, which--is a will.

SHARON: It's a will. [both laugh] And given Miss Dawson's reaction when she--the maids didn't know what it was, but Miss Dawson reacted very poorly and got in an argument with Mary, and so forth. And there's a very--I don't know if it's as clumsily rendered in your book, Charis, but in mine they have her do a diagram, and the diagram is almost illegible? I wonder if it--it's very deliberately amateurish.

CHARIS: Yeah--in my book it's large enough to be relatively clear? It takes up about half a page. But if it were printed any smaller it would be almost impossible to tell what it is.

SHARON: Yeah. So, basically, all of a sudden it feels like a motive has been provided for Miss Whittaker? Because for whatever reason she didn't feel secure in the inheritance that she'd been promised, and so now Peter is like 'okay, there seems to be not necessarily animosity, but for some reason she was trying to secure this inheritance'--

CHARIS: For some reason she was pushing for her aunt to sign a will, and her aunt insisted that she would not. And we hear from a couple of sources about how Miss Dawson, anytime someone spoke to her about a will--like one time the doctor suggested it, and it upset her, and another time a solicitor, her old solicitor came to visit her, and she got so upset that she took all of her affairs out of his hands and moved to a different solicitor.

SHARON: Exactly. So this is a deeply upsetting topic to her.

CHARIS: Right. Anytime someone speaks to her about a will she gets upset about the fact that they're trying--that they want her to die. So, it's like, why was Miss Whittaker trying to get her aunt to sign a will, to give her money, presumably--because why would you trick someone into signing a will that didn't benefit you--to give her money that she was going to get anyway.

SHARON: Right, and doing this knowing how upset her aunt would get about it, and deciding to take that risk anyway. So, yeah, that adds a bit, and then the other wrench that gets thrown into the proceedings as we mentioned, is the fact that Mary Whittaker has an alibi for the whole time that Bertha Gotobed was missing and then off being killed.

CHARIS: Right--Peter has been convinced this entire time that Mary Whittaker is the murderer, he says it at the very beginning, but Miss Findlater provides an alibi for Miss Whittaker for the time period of the murder. And there's an additional wrench, which is that a new character is introduced, Mrs. Forest. Bertha Gotobed is found with a five pound note in her handbag? And they trace that note to this Mrs. Forest. And there's a great deal of confusion.

SHARON: About how she fits in, and is it--Bertha Gotobed's landlady is convinced that it's drugs! And gangs! And so forth.

CHARIS: Mmhm, well and Parker also makes that suggestion.

SHARON: Yeah. So all of a sudden, this case that in Peter's mind was so straightforward has become very complex! So when we pick up next time we will talk about the conclusion of the case, how he unravels it all--

CHARIS: [chuckling] This is a tricky one to talk about, without giving away all the spoilers, because it's just like 'uh, can we even talk about this?'

SHARON: Right! [laughs] I feel like we've been trying to be really meticulous and trying to hit all the plot points, because it is so complicated.

CHARIS: It is a complex one, but in our next episode we will lay out all the pieces.

SHARON: Yes, in addition to talking about what to do with some casual racism in literature that you read. So. Something to look forward to.

CHARIS: [blandly] Yaaaaaaaay.

SHARON: [laughs]

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

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

Sharon: See you next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC gradually fades out]