

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 6 transcript

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

CHARIS: Hello and welcome to As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Charis Ellison--

SHARON: And I'm Sharon Hsu. Today we're discussing the second half of UNNATURAL DEATH, the third Peter Wimsey novel. And a content note for our listeners, UNNATURAL DEATH contains several instances of a racial slur. We will not be saying the word ourselves, but we will be having a discussion in this episode about its use.

CHARIS: And today we're spoiling the whodunnit right away. So if you haven't finished reading UNNATURAL DEATH, pause the podcast until you've turned that last page and then come back and join us.

SHARON: And now let's dig in to UNNATURAL DEATH.

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

CHARIS: So Sharon, in our last episode we struggled a good bit to talk about this book at all without giving away everything about the really complex murder plot. It's really hard to discuss, isn't it?

SHARON: It is! I was just chuckling to myself that we essentially just told our listeners who haven't finished this book to just not listen to this episode! [both laughing] Turn off the episode, go away!

CHARIS: Read it and come back! Because it's impossible to talk about this book in any kind of detail without just-- blahhhhh, giving everything away. So yeah, last episode was a little bit of a struggle, but we're going to give away everything. Right now. So would you like to give our listeners just a little reminder-slash-crash-course in the moving parts of the mystery?

SHARON: Uh yes, I will do my best, because there are many. But listeners, this is your last warning. Avert thine ears if you have not yet finished the book or don't want to know the whodunnit.

CHARIS: [laughing helplessly] Sharon, I just took a sip of coffee! You can't say things like that! [both giggling]

SHARON: Okay [clears throat, says mock-seriously] we are very, very professional podcasters. This mystery is in many ways more of a howdunnit than a whodunnit -- and I think we'll save the method of murder for a little further into this episode -- and I'm certainly not the first person to

make that observation. But because it's a non-traditional mystery in that there aren't multiple suspects that appear, it is really, really difficult to talk about this book without this shared assumption of knowing who the culprit is. So the whodunnit: it turns out that Peter is right all along. It is in fact Mary Whittaker--

SHARON AND CHARIS simultaneously and deadpan: Shocking--

SHARON: Shocking, shocking, so surprised. Mary Whittaker killed her aunt. Mary Whittaker killed Bertha Gotobed. Mary Whittaker will go on to kill other people in the second half of this book and attempt to kill other people. This book is just full of murder and attempted murder.

CHARIS: Sooo much murder. The highest body count I think of any Sayers novel.

SHARON: I think by far! Right?

CHARIS: Yeah, significantly.

SHARON: And it turns out that Mrs. Forrest, who was a character that turned up after Bertha Gotobed's body was found as being connected to the five pound note that's found in her purse and whom we briefly mentioned last time, it turns out that Mrs. Forrest was Mary Whittaker's alter ego. She'd set up this whole other persona in Town in order to hide some evidence and to lure other characters in so that she could murder them, or try to. And that doesn't come out until towards the end of the book because the Mrs. Forrest side plot is a bit of a red herring because Peter and Parker go meet with her. I think one thing this book does pretty cleverly do, I think because we have Miss Climpson as an additional point of view character, you kind of don't realize until much later on that oh yeah, Peter and Parker never meet Mary Whittaker until the end, right? They just meet Mrs. Forrest. And Miss Climpson never meets Mrs. Forrest, she just meets Mary Whittaker. And so there are all these strands that are kept apart.

CHARIS: Yeah, this would be a difficult book to film because the audience would be seeing these two people and it would be difficult for it to be realistic and have them not realize it's the same person. But our detectives can't know that, because the whole-- the book would be over halfway through. If Peter had just happened to see Mary Whittaker once, he would have recognized Mrs. Forrest right away. And so that separation between the two arms of the investigation is really crucial to keeping the plot worrying along.

SHARON: Yeah, that's a really good point. It's definitely a plot that maybe only works in a non-visual format, I think?

CHARIS: Mmm, well, you could do it? But I think you would have to do it carefully. And obviously there's a big visual difference between Mary Whittaker and Mrs. Forrest, right? Mary Whittaker is described as being fashionable but not feminine when she's described from Miss Climpson's perspective.

SHARON: Right, people are always calling her "handsome."

CHARIS: Yes, she's described as "handsome," she's described as beautifully tailored, but with harsh strong lines. You know, you kind of get a Katherine Hepburn vibe? But then Mrs. Forrest is described as *overly* feminine, like almost a caricature of femininity. She wears heavy makeup and her eyebrows are painted black and she wears like a peroxide blond wig and her nails are all done--

SHARON: Mmhmm, though she is... you know, we mentioned last time when we were talking about the depiction of lesbianism or of queer sexuality in this book that Mary Whittaker struck us both as a sex-repulsed asexual? And--

CHARIS: Definitely, definitely repulsed by interacting with Peter. [chuckling]

SHARON: Yes! Yeah, and the thing is she's in her Mrs. Forrest disguise when they have that encounter, when Peter goes and is trying to get evidence out of Mrs. Forrest. And he has this sort of realization that she's very awkwardly trying to seduce him. So he puts on this show of like "Okay, I'm going to kiss her really passionately" and he immediately twinges onto the fact that she goes completely rigid in his arms, she doesn't like what's happening. And so I suppose we gave a little bit of a clue ourselves last episode, because we talked about that scene in reference to Mary Whittaker.

CHARIS: In terms of Mary Whittaker but it happens with Mrs. Forrest. Hopefully we didn't spoil it for anyone. But yeah, that's such an awkward scene. It's ambiguous in a lot of ways, you're right. Like is she repulsed by physical contact or is it just that she's repulsed by men?

But the thing is that we don't see Mary Whittaker have a relationship with *anyone* that isn't a relationship that's manipulative, with a power imbalance, where her goal is her own advantage, right? So we... [sighs] at no point... it's hard to analyze Mary Whittaker as a character because at no point in the book do we interact with her really on a genuine level where we know anything about her. You know? We don't know anything about how she operates as a person other than... other than as a murderer.

SHARON: [chuckles] As a murder machine.

CHARIS: Right! She's just out here killing people, and she's out here for all she can get. And she's *remorseless*. And it's like *why*? You know, in WHOSE BODY? where we also have a very elaborate murder plot, we have all these things going on, but we also have this whole long thing where we get to see things from the murderer's perspective and have him explain himself. But Mary Whittaker, it's just like--

SHARON: Yeah. She's... I feel like she's a character who's almost entirely without an interior? Or at least without an interior that we as readers can access?

CHARIS: Mhmm. We don't know what matters to her, other than getting this fortune that she thinks that she's due. But we don't know, like, are there people who matter to her? Or is she kind of like Freke, someone who lacks any moral conscience?

SHARON: Right. I think what's interesting about that is you and I have talked quite a bit at length about how carefully Sayers always populated her world. Even these very minor characters who flit across the page get backstories and get their points of view highlighted. And so it's really fascinating to me for her to create a culprit who is so... yeah, almost entirely seemingly without motive. Like, money is a good motive, but *why* does she want this money? Why is she so--

CHARIS: It's like okay, it was a lot of money, but it's not like she's going to be destitute without it. She has a career she could go back to.

SHARON: Yeah! And you don't get this sense that she became this extravagant spendthrift, right?

CHARIS: Mhmm. She lives very comfortably and has nice things, but it's not like she's suddenly jetting around the world. She's still living quietly in the country.

SHARON: Maybe our listeners will have more thoughts about that impermeability of her character. But I think that is really what, when critics are talking about a kind of potentially veiled homophobia or just the discomfort that an audience feels regarding the depiction of a kind of queer sexuality in this book, I think that's what we're all twiggling on? That discomfort of having a character who can be read in that way as a stereotype and to have her be so excessively cold and murderous and unfeeling--

CHARIS: And predatory. And taking advantage of a younger person. That's something that you can imagine a little bit of homophobic panic. "Oh no. They're gonna corrupt the young. They're gonna seduce young people." I almost feel like that's something that Sayers did subconsciously? Where she's like "Ooh, what are people afraid of?" But it is troubling that we have Mary Whittaker as this predatory figure who definitely reads as playing on homophobic fears, right? I think whether she's intended to actually be a lesbian or not, I think the narrative makes it fairly obvious, especially with Miss Climpson's reference to the Clemence Dane book. And there are some later references where Miss Climpson's having a conversation with Vera Findlater where she's trying to warn her away from her intimacy with Mary Whittaker, and poor Miss Climpson, poor sweet Miss Climpson, is encouraging her to maybe be interested in men, 'cause it's more "natural" and it can be a "fruitful union," and I'm just like "Oh no, Miss Climpson, oh dear."

SHARON: Miss Climpson. Yes.

CHARIS: I feel like those fears are being very deliberately referenced and played on--

SHARON: Deployed

CHARIS: Yeah, yeah, deployed is a good word. And that is something that is maybe separate from whether Mary Whittaker is actually supposed to have a certain sexuality or not, you know? Does that make sense?

SHARON: It does! I think that's a really important distinction to make -- that the narrative might be depending on a public stereotype or public fears. But I think it wraps back in some sense too to the question of surplus women or the problem of surplus women that we talked about last time. 'Cause when Peter goes to see Mrs. Forrest, I'm looking at this description of her from his point of view that is in chapter 15. It says: "Mrs. Forrest was handsome enough, but she had not a particle of attraction for him. For all her makeup and her somewhat outspoken costume, she struck him as spinsterish, even epicene." And I feel like the use of that word "spinsterish" is really deliberate there. In this book full of spinsters, we're kind of picking up this thread of maybe a social fear that without enough men around, do women become sexless, do they become lesbians?

And I don't think Sayers is deploying that unthinkingly at all, especially given what we know about she and her friends were really thoughtful about the limited roles that society offered them as wives and mothers. And how... I don't want to put my foot wrong here, but I feel like that's all kind of in the atmosphere of this book. But there's a slight poking fun of the way that maybe old-fashioned people like Miss Climpson feel about young spinsters, but at the same time a lot of the suspense and the horror depend on the deployment of these stereotypes as well.

CHARIS: The description of Mary Whittaker and her relationship with Vera Findlater is a bit sticky in terms of representation. We talked a little bit in our last episode about how important it is that that portrayal is balanced out by a different portrayal of a relationship that's very easy to read as a lesbian relationship between Agatha Dawson and Clara Whittaker. We get that story here in chapter 12 in "A Tale of Two Spinsters." What happens is Peter and Parker take a little weekend trip to the town where Agatha Dawson and Clara Whittaker lived and they meet some elderly people who knew them and describe their relationship to them. And you really get the impression that Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson were a very devoted couple. And you also get the impression that they had a really balanced partnership. And I feel like that's a really important distinction in terms of what Sayers thought made for a healthy relationship. You talked last time about how their portrayal is still a little bit stereotyped in that one of them is a little more masculine and one of them is a bit more traditionally feminine in terms of being the domestic partner. But the stories that Peter hears about them being a couple, you get the impression that they had a partnership. And that's so different from the relationship we see Mary Whittaker

having, for instance, with Vera Findlater, where it's one-sided and controlling and not balanced at all.

SHARON: Yeah! This comes later in chapter 16 but we get that scene scene between Miss Climpson and Miss Findlater, where Miss Findlater is saying to Miss Climpson "Oh, Mary and I have those real friendships where I would die for her, we're incredibly loyal to each other" and -- on the one hand, this is where Miss Climpson is like "Oh, dear, maybe you should consider men?"

CHARIS: [giggling] Have you considered having a nice boyfriend?

SHARON: Yeah, and Miss Findlater is very "Oh, I don't believe that men could possibly have the depth of friendship that women do." But it's interesting because they turn a little to theology, where Miss Findlater is saying "Well, in the Bible love should be as strong as the grave and jealousy should be as strong as the grave, and great friendship makes demands, that's what Christian love means. One's ready to die for the other person." And Miss Climpson responds, "Well, I don't know. I once heard a sermon about that from a most splendid priest. And he said that kind of love might become idolatry if one wasn't very careful. He said Milton's remark about Eve, you know, 'he for God only, she for God in him' was not congruous with Catholic doctrine. One must get the *proportions* right, and it was out of proportion to see everything through the eyes of another fellow creature."

And so... at that point it's not... Miss Climpson's not talking about a kind of corrective sexuality, she's talking about corrective proportionality and mutuality. It's not about oh just find the right young man and you're gonna have good, mutual heterosexual love or whatever. She's saying this kind of abject worship and loyalty, especially when it's not returned correctly, is not healthy for *anyone*. It's not natural for anyone.

CHARIS: You almost feel like she's getting through to Miss Findlater a little bit because Miss Findlater's saying like "But if the friendship is mutual, that was the point, quite unselfish on both sides, it *must* be a good thing!" We know that Vera Findlater at this point -- Miss Climpson doesn't know -- but we know reading this a second time, we're aware that Vera Findlater is covering for Mary Whittaker at this point, and you can see how she's working really hard to convince herself that things are fine.

SHARON: And it's interesting, right, because the book is very disapproving of the fact that she is lying to provide an alibi for Mary Whittaker because of this loyalty. And you and I were kind of talking backstage, as it were, about how in CLOUDS OF WITNESS Freddy Arbuthnot very cheerfully perjures himself at one point? And it's interesting because in that book I don't feel like there's a sense at all from the narrative or from other characters that he did the wrong thing. And I don't know if that's a gender thing, or a class thing, or what.

CHARIS: I think probably an element of both. And then probably also an element of... that it's kind of okay for Freddy because yes he lied on the stand but also he's telling the truth to Peter? And Peter having the truth is what's most important in terms of the narrative. Thinking of the series as a whole, in a couple of the future books, we're going to run into more than one instance where Peter knows a truth that he doesn't share. And we've talked a good bit in our episodes so far about Peter's zealotry for truth and the importance of truth. And if you know the truth the pieces fall into place. I think what matters to the narrative is that Peter has the truth but not necessarily that the truth is known to everyone, right? Peter is in some ways really handled as the moral authority in some of those situations, which is interesting considering how often we see him struggling with moral decisions and his place in those moral decisions.

SHARON: Right. But I wonder also if that's part of... I don't know, the narrative always talks about Charles having a kind of stodgy Victorian kind of morality [both chuckling]

CHARIS: A solid middle-class morality.

SHARON: Yeah, and there's also an uncomfortable class thing there, right? Like, oh, if the nobility only thought about things in shades of grey, they should make decisions about morality for all of us.

CHARIS: But I don't think it's the nobility in general, it's very specific to Peter.

SHARON: That's very true. No one wants Gerald making moral decisions for them!

CHARIS: No one wants Gerald making any moral decisions for anyone. Or Helen. It's very specific to Peter. And I don't know if that's because Peter as the detective is... we talked a little bit in a previous episode about how the detective is something for the reader to identify with? And so I don't know if Peter being the one who knows the truth is most important is just because he's our stand in or our representative in the text? And is it that what matters is that we ourselves know the truth is what's important? If you start looking at the way the books handle truth and is Peter the arbiter of who needs to know what truth... I don't know, I feel like that maybe comes down to a more complicated question about whose truth are we talking about and is it the reader's, is it society's? I don't know. I'm doing the thing again where I just say stuff and I don't know what the answer is, but I would be very interested if people want to write a paper about it and send it to us! If anyone wants to tackle this as a thesis project, please keep us updated!

SHARON: Yeah, that is what makes these books so interesting, right? That's why we're doing a podcast. If we had easy answers to any of this, you and I would just be talking about this on our own. There'd be no need to wander in these directions.

CHARIS: The easy answers in these books are "do we love these characters?" Yes we do. And then everything else is complicated.

SHARON: I did want to bring up, since we've spoken a little bit about class, I do think this book makes several pointed comments about who does the work, which we've been interested in in the past, right? But there's one point in which Parker and Peter are talking about Mary Whittaker and what the motive might be, and Parker's saying it's a bit selfish of Miss Dawson to die without making a will or maybe not selfish but it's self-centered? It's not very thoughtful to Miss Whittaker. You know, "After taking the poor girl from her job under promise of leaving her the dibs," and Peter retorts "Teach the young woman not to be so mercenary." And the narrative says, "with the cheerful brutality of the man who has never in his life been short of money." So it's being very pointed there about Peter's privilege.

And then quite a bit later on, Parker's been sent off to find various solicitors to test a hypothesis, and "he'd been calling on solicitors for two whole days and his soul sickened at the sight of the brass plate." And the narrative says, "Parker was one of those methodical, painstaking people whom the world could so ill spare. When he worked with Wimsey on a case it was an understood thing that anything lengthy, intricate, tedious, and soul-destroying was done by Parker."

CHARIS: [lovingly] Oh Parker!

SHARON: I know! I drew a lot of hearts there. And on the one hand that's certainly a trope, right? The stodgy, plodding, dependable middle-class detectives, the Watsons as it were. But I do think that this book is a little more pointed than the previous two regarding all those luxuries that Sayers gave Peter because she herself didn't have them. She's now doing a little bit of a hmm what are the ways in which he can't sympathize with other people?

CHARIS: Yeah, although WHOSE BODY? does have that great bit where it's not even Parker's case, he's just like oh someone should go ask questions at all the apartments around where the body was found and Peter's like "Well, you... just you do it. You'll be good at that."

SHARON: "Let's us you do that." Voluntelling you.

CHARIS: And Parker's just like, "Well *you* won't do it, so I'd better." And then does it. Oh Parker.

SHARON: I know. Such a dear.

CHARIS: I have thought about this and I would not ever want to marry a Peter Wimsey. I love Peter, but I would never want to marry him. Out of all the characters in the book, I would much rather marry a Parker.

SHARON: Mmm, dependable. Not high-strung. Does the work!

CHARIS: [laughing] Yes, I'm high-strung enough, I don't think a relationship could handle two of us!

SHARON: Marry a Parker and hire a Bunter.

CHARIS: Yes, which, speaking of, can we just take a moment? Because I'm so excited. I have been for *years* trying to talk my family into getting a robot vacuum. A Roomba or Roomba-esque situation.

SHARON: [laughing] This is not a paid advertisement, listeners!

CHARIS: This is not a paid advertisement, I'm just so thrilled! We're finally getting one. So we're going to have a robot vacuum, and we're talking about names for it because we have to name our robot. And it wasn't even my idea. My mom suggested that we name it "Bunter."

SHARON: Awwwwwww!

CHARIS: And I'm so excited! There's going to be a little robot vacuum trundling around the house and it's going to be named Bunter and I'm so pleased.

SHARON: That is so delightful! I love that.

CHARIS: It's going to be great!

SHARON: One of Sayers's friends, I forget if it was Muriel St. Clair Byrne or Dorothy Rowe or somebody, but Sayers had a friend whose dog was named Bunter. I'm just endlessly pleased by that tidbit. It shall be a very good robot vacuum.

CHARIS: Yes, I am so delighted. Anyway, yes, um, robot vacuum digression.

SHARON: I think it's because it's far more pleasant than, like... I know we need to talk casual racism in this book, but [long sigh].

CHARIS: Yes, having talked about some happy things, some cheerful things, shall we have another downer?

SHARON: Yes, let's.

CHARIS: 'Cause we cannot put it off forever, because it is an important thing to talk about.

SHARON: Mhmm. Yeah, the fact that the n-word shows up not just once but multiple times in this book. And that is... a choice that Sayers made. And I don't know if it's just that

UNNATURAL DEATH is one of the Wimseys I've reread the least, but I'd forgotten that it was in here. And it was such a shock to see it printed in big letters. Just all caps.

CHARIS: Yes, in one of Miss Climpson's letters! She writes it in all caps. It's just like oh my goodness.

SHARON: Yeah. And I already know the objection some of our listeners will have, which is that she's reporting what someone else has said to her, and it's supposed to be poking fun at how racist this other person is. But. Ehhhhh.

CHARIS: The easy argument to make is that the word wasn't so bad at the time [SHARON groans in the background] and... it's just one of those things where it's like, okay, maybe it wasn't considered as bad, but that doesn't make it good.

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: It doesn't make it fine.

SHARON: I'm sorry, this is the nineteen-almost-thirties. The *entire* Harlem Renaissance is happening, right? W.E.B. DuBois is writing--there's, it's [frustrated chuckle] I mean, I think in the sense that it was not considered as bad in certain circles, so certainly we can make the verisimilitude argument that Sayers is representing the attitude that some people would have had and that this is in here for shock value and so forth, but it's still really, really uncomfortable. And to me it's uncomfortable that part of the reason that we as readers can say "Oh yeah, she's pointing out how racist these other people are" is because when Peter and Parker go to meet the long-lost cousin it turns out that he's actually this extremely mild, wonderful priest from the West Indies. But once again circling back to what we said with WHOSE BODY?--

CHARIS: The "credit to his race" trope really plays in.

SHARON: Yeah! The demand that people of color be respectable before they can be considered human is... like for me as a woman of color, I'm like Oh! That attitude is just never great or easy or fun to run across in any of the literature I love, right?

CHARIS: Right. Especially when it's an author you care about and it's an author who has this really affirming opinion that people's personhood should come first, and that shows up in other areas like gender, but then when it comes to race, kind of...

SHARON: Falls down on the job.

CHARIS: Yeah, falls apart a little bit. And that's... disappointing. Disappointing is a mild word.

SHARON: Yeah, I was reading a really good article by Professor Carolyn Betensky that just came out. Unfortunately it's still so new that it's still behind an academic paywall, but I found this article really instructive for me, both as a reader and as someone who's trying to grapple with this casual racism in public and as someone who used to teach. The article's titled "Casual Racism in Victorian Literature," so that's what it's about. It says it on the tin. And she's really also... the premise is she's teaching Victorian texts to undergraduates and there's a certain way in which it's often harder to talk about the casual uses of racism or the casual references. You know, in some senses it's easier to teach a book like, say, HEART OF DARKNESS where race and representation of race and of empire and so forth are very much the point of the book? And so, it's so thematically present that as an educator you'd be irresponsible to try to sidestep it and nobody does. But there are also, when you're teaching a survey of Victorian literature or early-twentieth century literature, there's often these little... just these little tidbits scattered throughout, little stereotypes. So we talked last time about the offhand mention of an "elderly obese" Jewish man in the jewelry shop and here this casual use of the n-word or like when they find Miss Gotobed's body, Peter's sort of describing the scene, and there's a ham sandwich. And he says, "Observe the hard texture, the deep brownish tint of the lean, the rich fat, yellow as a Chinaman's cheek, the dark spot," etc. etc.

So Professor Betensky's making the point that it's these little casual slurs or stereotypes or bits that are in some ways harder to deal with, because these are texts that we don't especially associate with racism, but, she says, "in which racist language or figuration occurs, nonetheless, in passing." And on the one hand what makes these difficult is because it's so unsurprising, because of the ability to say, like, "Well yeah, everybody talked like that at the time" or "they were just adding a little local color" or even "maybe Sayers was critiquing that people speak in this way," but part of Professor Betensky's argument in this piece is that making those excuses is often just an excuse for ourselves. To be able to say "Oh, look how far we've come. There's no historic continuity between us, good, twenty-first century people who know not to use the n-word, and the people of Sayers's time who were backwards, and this and that." Or that racism is always... always people wearing sheets with torches rather than systems of language and of assumptions and of expectations and stereotype that suffuse everything. Like the reason the word showing up is not surprising is because racism is the air we breathe? I don't know, I feel like I've wandered in a circle a bit. Maybe cut that last bit about racism being the air we breathe.

CHARIS: I don't know, 'cause I feel like that's really effective and true. I was having some insomnia, so I was lying awake thinking about the conversation we had about CLOUDS OF WITNESS where we were talking about Mrs. Grimethorpe and the Orientalism in her description. Especially in that moment where Peter in the narrative is thinking of her as almost like an exotic mummy dropping the perfumed gravebands from her hands. And I was thinking about that passage and we talked about the Orientalism and exoticizing in that passage, and we kind of didn't take it apart further, 'cause... that passage, it's beautifully written, right? It's poetic language. And it serves a really good function in terms of the character where it's drawing these parallels between Mrs. Grimethorpe as being something that's been trapped or encased, something that has been dead and has the potential for a resurrection? There's all kinds of

interesting subtext and parallels and things happening in that paragraph, so it's not a case of that not being good writing, but it also very specifically draws a direct line between all those things and the fact that she looks foreign and potentially looks Jewish. And I'm just like that's where the problem is. I feel it would have been entirely possible to draw those comparisons without making it about "Oh, she's exotic and interesting because she's not white." That paragraph could have still done all those things!

SHARON: Yeah. And there are ways of showing that characters are racist without using racist language. Whether Sayers was trying to critique the thing or was unconsciously replicating the thing, the moment that you use the language of the thing that maybe you're even trying to take apart or critique, the harmful language, right? The very harmful language that does harm and that indicates to me at least that whoever her imagined audience was it certainly wasn't black people, which seems like a huge oversight. Replicating the problematic thing in trying to critique the problematic thing is still a problem.

CHARIS: Right. You know, you mentioned being surprised to reread this book and to see it on the page. I was even more surprised, 'cause I think I've mentioned on the podcast before that I love the Ian Carmichael audiobooks and I've listened to the audiobooks far more times than I've actually read the books on the page just because at my former office job, which was extremely boring, I kind of survived by listening to audiobooks. And I listened to the Wimsey audiobooks at least twice a year for several years at that job. So I'm very familiar with the audiobooks and you mentioned that you're just "Oh, I was surprised by the use of the n-word." And I was just like what? The use of the where? [SHARON chuckles in background] Because it's omitted from the audiobook entirely! They just replace it in the text with the term "black man." And the text loses nothing at all, really! And it shows how easy it is to discuss... the racism of other characters is still very clearly portrayed in their actions without the use of the word itself.

SHARON: Yeah, it's quite clear from all the other context that the people Miss Climpson encounters in this little village are provincial or narrow-minded or so forth, right? Because they gossip, because they... there's that really funny bit where one of the characters is referring to Miss Climpson, and I forget what she calls herself when she's undercover, but this other character refers to her as a "roaming Catholic." And that to me, that's funny! You know? That's a really good way to show that this character is not very open-minded and maybe not very worldly and so forth and it does *not* rely on racist language.

CHARIS: Well, we came at this a little bit backwards, discussing the slur without talking about the character it's in reference to.

SHARON: Cousin Hallelujah. 'Cause [chuckles] turns out this book revolves around an inheritance plot and a long-lost cousin.

CHARIS: Yes, Agatha Dawson's family. One of the things Peter learns when he digs into the history of the family is that if you go up the family tree and down another branch a little bit, you

find a long-lost cousin, named Hallelujah. He's Hallelujah Dawson. He's a mixed race gentleman from the West Indies.

SHARON: He's a reverend.

CHARIS: He's a reverend in poor circumstances who came to England and came looking for Agatha Dawson while she was still alive and met her. And she was giving him an allowance. And once Peter untangles the family tree, he discovers that Mary Whittaker is not actually Agatha Dawson's niece, even though they use those terms for each other. Mary Whittaker is the great-niece of Clara Whittaker, and Clara Whittaker's brother was married to Agatha Dawson's sister. So Mary Whittaker is only Agatha Dawson's great-niece by marriage.

SHARON: So she's no longer the closest relation.

CHARIS: Right! So with the introduction of Hallelujah Dawson down another branch of the family tree, he actually would have been a closer relative to Agatha Dawson than Mary Whittaker. So you'd think that Mary Whittaker would've had a motive to get rid of Hallelujah, but Peter and Parker locate Hallelujah. They go to visit him at this little mission. And he explains to them very openly that he'd done some research into his own family history and made the unfortunate discovery that his grandfather or great-grandfather had claimed to marry a woman from the West Indies and had given her a fake marriage certificate. So he's not a legitimate descendant and just completely wipes out the entire long-lost relative inheritance plot immediately. In some ways it's really funny that Peter's like "Well, we think we've got this all figured out" and they go meet Hallelujah and he's like "No, it turned out that I had no claim on Miss Dawson at all, but I introduced myself to her and she was very kind to me and gave me lunch. And was giving me a small allowance." And we actually know from Miss Climpson's letter that when Hallelujah visited Miss Dawson, Miss Dawson's cook walked out, because she wouldn't serve lunch to a black man. And so you do get that contrast between Agatha Dawson being kind and fair-minded and hospitable and the attitude of her former cook. And you also find out that Mary Whittaker did not continue the small allowance that Agatha Dawson was giving to Hallelujah. Which, why not, Mary Whittaker? Who has all this money!

SHARON: And, uncomfortably, later on, she tries to frame him, right? And she tries to frame him in *the* most racist terms possible, where she stages an abduction of herself and of Vera Findlater and uses pulp novels to try to tie it to a black culprit. And certainly the book condemns that. There's, to be fair, the really outright racist attitudes are always connected to bad characters, or in the case of Mary Whittaker, to villains. Or even the cook who walked out, it's clear from context that we as readers are supposed to see her as small-minded or not as accepting as Miss Dawson. And Miss Dawson is portrayed in a positive light for being accepting. So that's all there! I just... could've done without the word!

CHARIS: Yeah. Do you want to give our readers a little sketch of that abduction plot?

SHARON: This comes near the end of the book. Our detectives are closing in on Mary Whittaker. And she disappears with Vera. Leads them on a merry chase and then finally Peter and Parker and some local constables find Vera Findlater's body.

CHARIS: Poor Vera Findlater.

SHARON: This is the first murder that Mary Whittaker commits that is not hidden as a "natural death." It's very violent. The whole scene where they find her is really, really incredible.

CHARIS: It has a nightmare quality, doesn't it?

SHARON: Yeah! Kind of going back to that... we were talking about how Sayers describes really gruesome things without gruesome description, right? We really don't ever get a pan in on her face or her head, but when Peter approaches the body, he almost starts dissociating again.

CHARIS: Yeah, the language becomes so vague and distant.

SHARON: Mmhmm, but there are these little details of "The person was sleeping oddly. The flies must be such a nuisance around her head like that. And then the flies rose up in a little cloud," which is just... eeeuuuuugh. So Mary Whittaker's killed Vera Findlater in this fashion, and then she stages a little scene of herself being dragged into a car. So this is all done through footprints and tire marks and so forth. But it's made to look like she's being dragged into a car. And in the car that's left behind, there's a yellow hat and there's a pulp magazine. "An American magazine of mystery and sensational fiction, published under the name THE BLACK MASK."

CHARIS: And she's underlined the word "black."

SHARON: Mmhmm, mmhmm. Peter and Parker see through this immediately, but the constable of the town who's accompanied them says, "Bless my soul! And English girl in the hands of a black man! How abominable!" Mary Whittaker is really deliberately playing on these tropes. She knows that would be the immediate conclusion that a lot of people would draw, and she seemingly has no remorse about that. And she sends a massive check to Hallelujah Dawson, which he merrily is like oh great, she wants to honor her aunt's bequest! He goes and cashes it and gets arrested right away.

CHARIS: We're talking about how it's terrible that Mary Whittaker is framing Hallelujah Dawson, but it's also a fact that Peter and Parker deliberately allow it to happen. They could've prevented Hallelujah from going and cashing the check, but they want Mary Whittaker to think that her frame up worked. So they allow poor Hallelujah to be publicly arrested. And I *hope* that they warned the people who'd be arresting him that he's not actually a criminal, just take him aside and explain that he's being arrested for show, but we *don't* know that in fact!

SHARON: And the narrative makes no point about that.

CHARIS: The narrative does not reassure us on that point.

SHARON: And I don't know if that's because the narrative even has an awareness of what often happens to black bodies in a white carceral state. That's again one of those places where we'd just be guessing about how much Sayers is aware of these things. But it's not... it's very uncomfortable!

CHARIS: It's uncomfortable and I'm glad that it's uncomfortable. Because I just imagine how when this book was written, many people wouldn't have even noticed? It wouldn't have been in the cultural awareness and I'm glad it's in the cultural awareness now. I wish it would've been more in the cultural awareness then. It is uncomfortable.

And I find this book difficult to discuss because in many ways, I like this book as a mystery. I think that the mystery functions really well. It's tightly plotted. All the moving pieces fit tightly. There's so many different characters who are interesting with unique voices. But there are also things about this book that I find genuinely upsetting. Like the murder of Vera Findlater, to me that's really horrific. This poor innocent girl, who's so young, who just wants to be important to somebody and is so innocent. And then being brutally murdered for the convenience of someone else. That's awful. And the murder of Bertha Gotobed. Another innocent person, who was engaged to be married soon, her life was just beginning. And like she's just murdered out of the blue and she doesn't even know why. We joked about how this book has a high body count and there's a lot of murder in it. But the plot *hinges* on multiple murders. Peter talks about in cases like this, when you can't prove in the original case that the murder happened, your only hope is for the murderer to slip up because they keep trying to cover their tracks. He talks about how murderers can't leave well enough alone.

SHARON: Yeah, we talked about that last time. If she had just stopped at one, no one would've ever known.

CHARIS: Yeah, there would've been nothing. But the thing is, one of the reasons I think those deaths are so uncomfortable... Bertha Gotobed and Vera Findlater died because Peter stirred the anthill with a stick. And we talked in our episodes about WHOSE BODY? about that wonderful theological conversation that Peter has with Parker about should I be investigating this, is this my business? And at the very beginning of this book, Dr. Carr tells Peter don't bother investigating this, it's not your business. And Peter's just like "I'm going to anyway, because I want to know. I can't leave it alone."

And Parker through the first half of the book keeps telling Peter you don't really have a case and it's not really your business and why are we doing this. And Peter keeps digging and poking, and people die because of it. I personally can't read this book and say Peter has no responsibility, because no he does. He's directly responsible for this happening. Not in the sense that you can be responsible for what someone else chooses to do, because Mary

Whittaker could've chosen not to kill people. But there is a direct line of cause and effect between Peter's choices and these young women dying. And I find that hard to chew on when I read this book and think about it critically. It's one thing to read the book and be a little detached because it's just a mystery, but when you start reading the book and start thinking about things in terms of real people and real cause and effect and real moral responsibility, it starts being a little bit of a mouthful.

SHARON: I definitely feel that way and that the ways to which racial stereotype and to some extent sexual stereotype get deployed in this book make it such that I can never just enjoy it.

CHARIS: All these things are almost weaponized, right? We talked about how it plays deliberately and directly on homophobic fears.

SHARON: And certainly on racial fears.

CHARIS: Right, on racial fears and on racial stereotypes. And how many ways the plot hinges on those things. It becomes a big sticky thing.

SHARON: And it's, you know, for me, these are real attitudes that are still around and that still do harm. And so even the use of them as red herrings or even the use of them as ways of clueing in the reader to who is or is not a good character or which characters do or do not have good *moral* character... I think I'm still uncomfortable with that. Because these things don't just exist in fiction.

CHARIS: Right, these things don't just exist in a vacuum either.

SHARON: Yeah. It's like how... I really love cozy mysteries, and I do read some contemporary mystery, but I always take issue with mysteries or thrillers where part of the point of view is from the perspective of the murderer. You see this a lot in contemporary thriller where part of the story is told from a psychopathic point of view or a serial killer of women, and I just, I never want to be in that perspective. I don't enjoy it. Even when it's very obvious... it's not like every writer of mystery is themselves misogynist or whatever, but I just don't... these attitudes are prevalent enough in life--

CHARIS: Yeah, if you can turn it on and see it on the pundits on the news, you don't need it in your fiction.

SHARON: Exactly. And I don't need to be asked to step into that perspective. So I think that's really where I come down on this book. I don't reread it very often, and I agree that it's a fairly airtight, haha, mystery. Pun intended, as we'll get to in a second. But I find it to be probably the darkest of the Wimsey books.

CHARIS: You know, I'm approaching it as a white reader who some of these things when I'm not thinking about it critically, they just went under the radar for me. And so I'd read it and enjoyed it many times before I started going "Wait a second." And engaging with it critically really changes the narrative a lot.

SHARON: There is certainly a kind of enjoyment that comes from deep critical reading. I think it's a false binary that people, for example when people find out that I've done graduate study in English, they're like "Oh, can you still read books for *fun*? Are you able to turn off the critical part of your brain?" And to me that's never the right question, because that part of my brain is always attuned to what's happening in literature. And there's an assumption in that question, I think, that it's not *deeply* enjoyable to read with a critical eye.

CHARIS: Right. It's not *not* fun!

SHARON: Yeah! There's a way in which I very much appreciate how the literary training that I've had allows me to put my finger on aspects of books when I'm like "Aggggh, I'm having a reaction" and what is that coming from. And being able to take that apart and maybe having critical distance. So in this case I have a lot to say about this book, but I don't, I don't... this is not bathtime reading for me, shall we say.

Well, should we talk about the howdunnit?

CHARIS: Yes, let's go into that by going back a little bit to when Peter and Parker leave town to go visit the village where Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson lived. Because they run into someone on the way there. Someone who's not an important character. They meet this young man who doesn't know how to fix his motorcycle. And Peter has a look and magically fixes it. And explains that he blew through the filler cap because there was an airlock in the feed, and that fixes it. And that's a little bit of a fun detail because we know that Sayers liked motorcycles. That she rode a motorcycle herself a bit. As I was digging around, I saw someone make the claim that the knowledge of the motorcycle engine and hence the murder method in this book was because Sayers had an affair with a mechanic, and I'm just "Uhh hmmm." Is it? IS IT because she had an affair with a mechanic, or was it because she herself liked motorcycles? Hmm.

SHARON: Right, and why not both!

CHARIS: Why not both?! I am not inclined to give any particular credit to--

SHARON: I know! So many biographers want to attribute all the interesting things in these books to the men Sayers knew and I'm just never about that!

CHARIS: Right! Like we talked about with Mo Moulton, when we were discussing their new book THE MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY, that there's so much about Sayers that came from these incredible women in her life and had nothing to do with the men at all!

So Sayers herself liked motorcycles. And this idea of an air bubble blocking a line in an engine so that it's not getting fuel directly inspires the murder method, and that helps Peter realize what the murder method is. Which is the injection of an air bubble into a vein. Or... into an artery?

SHARON: I think it's a vein in this book, but it should be an artery. Which I do think Sayers acknowledges in a letter later on, that she was so painstaking and meticulous and then made that big mistake. So the whole idea is that the artery would carry the air bubble into the heart and stop the heart.

CHARIS: So my mom is a nurse, and I asked her one time "Hey, would this work?" And she was like "Yeah, it would." And I'm just like [horrified garbled noise] It's so easy to kill people! I don't like that it's so easy!

SHARON: It's like how in AMERICAN GODS by Neil Gaiman there's this one con that I think Neil said he's very careful not to put in every single detail that's needed so that readers can't replicated the con themselves? [both laugh] I think it's a bank robbery. He's like, "I left out a few important details, because I realized I'd just be giving people instructions!"

CHARIS: Sometimes you read stuff and you're like "Oh, wow, it's so easy to take advantage of people. It's so easy to hurt people. It's so easy! To! Murder! People!"

SHARON: And make it look like a natural death!

CHARIS: I don't like that. I don't like how vulnerable that makes me feel! But yeah, I asked my mom and she said it would have to be a large needle and it would have to be in a major... you couldn't just do it anywhere. It would need to be in a major artery. But yeah, she was like, that would be really bad. That's why people are so careful when they're giving shots, they--

SHARON: Tap out the air.

CHARIS: Because it would cause problems, even a small bubble somewhere else. But yeah, it would cause heart failure if you did a large air bubble into a major artery. And that is what Mary Whittaker has been doing to people!

SHARON: It plays into her background as a nurse, she would know this. And it gives the appearance that death is brought on by heart failure, which is a very natural way to go, in some sense. And in the book there are many places where someone mentions, among many other details, that there was a syringe in the room and so forth. So it's very much that the clues are all there.

CHARIS: Right, and we know that Mrs. Forrest has a prescription for an injection for headaches, right? So she has syringes in her apartment that Peter sees.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And Peter early on speculates that "Oh, was it possible that Miss Dawson's injections got mixed up and she was given too much morphine or something?" And there's a big deal made that the doctor's requested autopsy report that showed no sign of overdose.

CHARIS: Yeah. So... yeah. It's terrifyingly easy to kill people. Uh, listeners--

CHARIS and SHARON, simultaneously: Please don't kill people.

CHARIS: Before we talk about the final confrontations, though, I went off on a little bit of a rabbit trail talking about Peter's responsibility. Sayers has been engaging with the question of Peter's moral responsibility throughout the book. We talked about how when he hears about Bertha Gotobed's death, he says, "Charles, I feel like a murderer." Which is fair. And shortly after this conversation is when he participates in the search for Vera Findlater and he doesn't fully disassociate the way he does in WHOSE BODY? But there's an echo in the way that's written and the way the autopsy scene in WHOSE BODY? is written. Where it's almost like he's looking at events from outside of himself? It's not as much a focus in this book, I would say, as it is in WHOSE BODY? But Peter is dealing with it and he has this fascinating conversation with Mr. Tredgold, who's the priest in the village where Miss Whittaker lives and where Miss Climpson has been living undercover. He goes to the church looking for Miss Climpson and meets the priest.

They have a conversation where Wimsey kind of unburdens his conscience a little bit. And the priest says, "Is there anything bothering you in particular?" And Wimsey says, "Nothing religious. I don't mean, nothing about infallibility or the Virgin Mary or that sort. Just something I'm not comfortable about." And he kind of explains without names to Mr. Tredgold this idea of "Suppose someone knows somebody who's very ill and they're in awful pain and all that and kept under morphia"--

SHARON: Just suppose. Hypothetical.

CHARIS: Just suppose! "Suppose somebody who knew all that was just to give them a little push off, so to speak." He's kind of asking the priest if Mary Whittaker did something morally wrong in the first place, by murdering her aunt. By causing the death of Agatha Dawson, who... at this point we've found out that the motive for the murders is that a new inheritance law was coming into effect, where if someone wasn't closely related enough then they didn't count as next of kin. And the inheritance would go to the Crown. It would essentially go to the government. And because of the complexities of the Dawson and Whittaker family trees, Mary Whittaker would actually not be a close enough relative. Maybe. The wording of the act was a little bit ambiguous. And we find out, because of Parker's painstaking--

SHARON: [chuckling] Running down lawyers--

CHARIS: Running down of lawyers, that someone matching Mary Whittaker's description did go consult a lawyer. And he told her if your relative dies without a will, the money may go to the Crown. And that's what starts Mary Whittaker off on first trying to trick her aunt into signing a will and then murdering her aunt.

SHARON: And many other people. Like she goes back and tries to murder that lawyer that she consulted too! Sorry, I shouldn't laugh. It isn't funny, but it is absurd.

CHARIS: It's a lot of murder! But Peter is talking to the priest and is saying the aunt wanted this money to go to the niece, and the niece by causing this death at this specific time before the act went into effect was making sure she got the money, so her aunt's wishes were being carried out, and she was taking her out of being in terrible pain, so [puts on uncertain voice] was it really that bad? And one of the things that I think is interesting is when the priest says, "I think that the sin, well I won't use that word, the damage to society, the wrongness of the thing, lies much more in the harm it does the killer than in anything it can do to the person who is killed. Especially, of course, if the killing is to the killer's own advantage." And he says "That puts it at once on a different plane than just 'hastening' a person's death out of pity."

SHARON: Right, because the killer is operating to their own advantage.

CHARIS: And he says, "Sin is in the intention, not the deed. That is the difference between divine law and human law. It is bad for a human being to get to feeling that he has any right whatever to dispose of another life to his own advantage. It leads him on to think himself above all laws. Society is never safe from the man who has deliberately committed murder with impunity. That is why, or one reason why, God forbids private vengeance." I think that that's very interesting as a theological point. And it's also in some ways like Sayers saying that Mary Whittaker murdering additional people was inevitable, regardless of what Peter did? Which may have been true. Maybe not the specific people that she murders in this book, but maybe at some point in the future someone else would've been in her way, or in between something she wanted or felt entitled to.

SHARON: Right, 'cause Mr. Tredgold is saying the harm it does to the killer is that it chips away at their morality, right?

CHARIS: Right, he says that in any case it leads to readiness to commit others, to commit additional murders.

SHARON: Though I don't think... do you think the book is really letting Peter off the hook that much? Because the ending is so...

CHARIS: Right. I don't know that it's letting him off a lot. But I do think it's trying to balance. Here, Peter says, "My beastly interference started the crimes all over again." The priest says, "I wouldn't so troubled. Probably the murderer's guilty fears would've led him into fresh crimes even without your interference." Which, Mary Whittaker *did* try to murder the lawyer before Wimsey did anything. And the priest says to him, "My advice to you is to do what you think is right according to the laws which we've been brought up to respect and leave the consequences to God. And try to think charitably even of wicked people. You know what I mean. Bring the offender to justice, but remember that if we all got justice, you and I wouldn't escape either." This is a very short encounter, just a couple of pages this conversation. They don't have an extremely deep heart to heart.

SHARON: But I think it's part of that theme that got started in WHOSE BODY and that is going to run all the way through the series of what is not just the private detective's moral responsibility, but how this instinct in Peter for the truth -- like as much as he might say, "Oh yes, I'm doing this to give my poor, PTSD-rattled brain something to do. I go off chasing these hares because it's interesting or because I'm curious" -- there comes a point where his adherence to the truth takes over and he can't help himself, he has to keep going. But at great personal, emotional cost. And the very end of this book... the book ends in literal darkness. Peter gets word that Mary Whittaker's killed herself awaiting trial. And in the final several paragraphs, it says, "Wimsey said nothing. He felt cold and sick." And everyone's making the necessary arrangements--

CHARIS: Right, because Mary Whittaker's hung herself in her cell and Peter and Parker go view the body.

SHARON: Mmhm, and then at the very, very end of the novel, Peter says: "'What is the matter with the day," said Wimsey. "Is the world coming to an end?'

'No,' said Parker, 'it is the eclipse.'"

And that's *it*. We cut out on this image of them walking back out into the London day and it's pale and yellow-ish outside and cold and raining and... and everything is darkness. There's a way in which... it's a cathartic novel, we were talking last time about catharsis, and this novel has catharsis in that the murderer is brought in and found out and we find out how she did this thing, but I think there's no emotional catharsis for Peter. We're kind of left with this image of him feeling cold and sick and horrible. And I often close the book also feeling a bit cold and sick and horrible.

CHARIS: Yeah, and that imagery of the eclipse is so... it's interesting that the eclipse isn't anticipated in the course of the book. It's not mentioned. You're just surprised by it. And we had an eclipse fairly recently and the way the light is altered, everything looks a little bit--

SHARON: It's very uncanny, yeah.

CHARIS: That mental image of the world being the wrong color and shadows being wrong and the idea of this book ending on that note of everything looks wrong... I do think that's a very interesting choice.

SHARON: Yeah, it leaves us very unsettled.

CHARIS: It's unsettling, and this is an unsettling book. I said earlier it's possible to be just reading it and reading it for the mystery and being like "Oh yeah, this is interesting." But once you start unraveling the emotional threads, it's disconcerting.

SHARON: Yeah, it's a toughie.

CHARIS: And you know, I was not anticipating that? When we went into this book.

SHARON: Huh. Would you still suggest that people start with this book?

CHARIS: [emphatically] I would *not*. Having read it critically, which I hadn't really done before -- I'd thought about WHOSE BODY? critically and about the Harriet Vane books much more in terms of critical reading -- but, this is a confession to our readers, but the pre-Harriet Vane mysteries I tended to disregard as the light ones. And now that we are tackling this project and I'm reading them again as an English major instead of just a reader the way I did before, it is a different ballgame. And it does change the way I read the book. And I'm like oh, I actually don't think this is such a great entry point anymore!

But I am wondering if UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, if upon rereading I'm going to be "Ah yes, that might be another good one to recommend to people that don't want to jump as far ahead as STRONG POISON."

SHARON: I guess we'll find out once we start talking about it! [laughing]

CHARIS: I guess that we will! But first, before we get to THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, we have a special holiday episode coming up. Join us in two weeks to discuss "The Locked Room." This is a Dorothy L. Sayers short story that appeared for the very first time in print this year. You can find it in the anthology BODIES FROM THE LIBRARY 2, edited by Tony Medawar. We'll include some links in our shownotes if you don't have the book yet and you want to purchase it. Or your friendly neighborhood librarian encourages you to request it at your local library. We're also going to be answering some questions from you, our listeners!

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]