

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 7 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 UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB. This is going to be the first of three episodes discussing this book, in which Wimsey is embroiled in yet another inheritance plot after an unpleasant event at his club on Armistice Day.

[Bright trumpet solo, reminiscent of hunting horns]

CHARIS: Before we get started, Sharon, this is our first episode of 2020--

[SHARON yells in disbelief]

CHARIS: [laughing] -- so welcome to the new decade!

SHARON: [laughing] No! I'm not ready.

CHARIS: But before we leave the holiday season behind, Sharon, I have an important question for you.

SHARON: Okay.

CHARIS: Which is, where did I rank on the Christmas card wall?

SHARON: Oh! Listeners, the background for this is that I have a few friends who send kind-of like more joke-y holiday cards. And Charis, a few years ago when she was visiting me, saw one and named that person as her nemesis. [both laughing] And I will say it was probably a tie between you and that person this year. [laughs]

CHARIS: [foiled] Oh no!

SHARON: But I really liked yours!

CHARIS: Thank you. I have to explain to people every year, I'm just like, "No, you don't understand, the *main* reason I do Christmas cards is so that I can win Sharon's wall." [laughs]

SHARON: [burst out laughing] Oh man, I really wanna flash forward now to fifty years from this Christmas to see what outlandish thing you're gonna have to come up with to keep topping each other.

CHARIS: And I don't think the other person even knows that they're my nemesis.

SHARON: No, no, they're entirely unaware.

CHARIS: They have no idea. This is a one-sided rivalry. [both laughing] But, having gotten that very important question out of the way--

SHARON: The most important question we--that's the whole reason we're having three episodes is to-- [drops off into laughter]

CHARIS: Yes, was to make room for that. But, yes, let's talk about some Sayers. Our first discussion about Sayers in 2020.

SHARON: Yeah. So, it's interesting to me that we have another mystery revolving around a will and, sort-of like, the complications of an inheritance. So, hot on the heels of UNNATURAL DEATH, it's like, "Hm. Why did Sayers return to that well so quickly?" And I think there's a way in which the books pair nicely in that regard, but we're also getting a lot of new themes, right? If UNNATURAL DEATH was about spinsters and extraneous women, I think UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB is really about, kind-of, the aftermath of World War I for all of these returning soldiers. And it's not coincidence that the early action of the book is set at a--like a gentlemen's club, right? A gentlemen's club in the traditional sense [laughing] of, um, a place where gentlemen gather to smoke cigars and talk about current events and so forth--

CHARIS: [chuckling] *Not* a cabaret.

SHARON: --No. No no no. And it's specifically a club for, like, veterans, The Bellona Club. Which is named after, I believe, the Roman goddess of war.

So, Charis, would you mind giving our listeners a brief sketch on scene/setting of what the mystery is, and the major players?

CHARIS: Yeah. So, this book opens on Armistice Day morning, with Wimsey at The Bellona Club. And it's really kind-of a fun opening chapter. You know, it bounces around. He's--there's a lot of

activity because it's Armistice Day, so there's lots of people around. He's chatting to different characters, the way that Sayers does so well.

SHARON: Mmhmm. Yeah, we see our old friend Mr.--sorry, *Colonel* Marchbanks.

CHARIS: Yes! Our old friend Colonel Marchbanks. And we're introduced to the idea of General Fentiman, who is this *extremely* elderly gentleman, who has *very* regular habits, and is famous for coming to The Bellona Club every day, sitting down in a specific armchair with the paper, and staying there for the entire day. [chuckles] Like that's his entire routine is to come to The Bellona Club, sit in the chair, and -- he's just a fixture.

And General Fentiman has two grandsons, and one of them is George Fentiman, who has a nervous temperament. He was gassed badly during the war, so, like, he has issues with his lungs, he has issues with PTSD -- things that we've discussed a little bit with regard to Peter, but seem to be quite severe and without an outlet for George. George's life is in an unhappy place.

So we're introduced to George Fentiman, and we have this short first chapter with all this activity in it. And our friend Colonel Marchbanks goes over to speak to General Fentiman, who's there in his chair, and he goes all quiet, and he comes over and asks Wimsey to come have a look. And the General is dead. This causes quite a stir, because his grandson, George Fentiman, has just a complete breakdown, and like, breaks down into hysterical laughter.

A few days later -- like after this unpleasantness -- our other dear friend, Mr. Murbles, comes to see Peter and explains that there is a complicated question about inheritance that's tied to General Fentiman's death. Which is that, General Fentiman -- this is where things get kind-of convoluted, so bear with us listeners -- General Fentiman had an estranged sister. He was from a poor, but very proud, family, and his sister upset the family by running off and marrying someone who was in trade. So like, a perfectly nice man with a good business, but someone who wasn't of their social class. The family disowned her and had nothing to do with her. The upper-class family got very poor indeed, and the estranged sister became Lady Dormer, because her husband who was in trade at some point was given a knighthood, and became a very wealthy woman indeed. She had no children, but she had a ward. And her will was that, if her brother predeceased her, all of her money--like, all of her money except for a small amount, would go to her ward. And then, if her brother survived her, a smaller amount of--like, still quite a reasonable amount [both laugh] -- but a smaller amount of money would go to Ann Dorland, her ward, and the significant amount of money would go to--would have gone to General Fentiman.

And it turns out that the night before they discovered General Fentiman's body, Lady Dormer was dying of an illness. And the General had actually been called to see her, they had reconciled on her deathbed, and then he had left. She died at some point in the early hours, and he died at some unknown time.

SHARON: Right. So, Murbles is asking Peter to see if he can suss out like *when* exactly the General died. Because all of a sudden this enormous inheritance is kind-of in question.

CHARIS: Does all the money go to Ann Dorland? Or does all of this money go to the executor of the General's will? Which is Robert Fentiman, the older of the two grandsons.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And I guess, like, maybe one other thing to mention is that the General had also had a will that, I think, Robert--Robert was aware that he'd be the executor, and that he, in the General's will, was getting a smaller amount than his brother George would have. Because George was married, and the General was like, "He needs something to live on, and to support his wife." But that they had both decided not to tell George about that inheritance, because they were hoping, you know, he would kind-of get himself together if he didn't know that he could depend on that. So there's sort-of like two wills.

CHARIS: Right. And the thing about the General's will is that it leaves the greater bulk of his known money to George. But that any money not specifically accounted for would go to Robert as the executor. Which, if the Fentimans were to inherit Lady Dormer's fortune, that would be money that was unaccounted for and it would all go to Robert as the executor.

SHARON: Yeah. A *significant* amount of unaccounted for money. [laughing]

CHARIS: [sarcastically wistful] Oh, to have so much unaccounted for money!

SHARON: [laughing] Uhh, don't go murdering your relatives--

CHARIS: I would never! I don't think any of my relatives have that much unaccounted for money. [laughing]

SHARON: Well, and if they do they're certainly not going to tell you now! [both laugh]

CHARIS: But yeah, so like, having gone into all those convoluted details, which, as I was saying it I'm just like, "Oh this sounds so boring when I'm saying it," but Sayers makes it pretty interesting. Because she conveys all that information with so much personality. We're getting

fed all of that information through dialogue, and everything is kind-of like colored with people's personalities, and it's much more lively than the summary that I just gave. [both chuckle]

But Peter is called in by Mr. Murbles, because Mr. Murbles is representing the Fentiman brothers, kind-of jointly. And Murbles comes privately to Peter and asks him to do what he can to determine the exact time of the General's death, because that is what is--that's the deciding factor. It's known exactly when Lady Dormer died, but no one saw General Fentiman the night or morning before--

SHARON: --they found the body.

CHARIS: Yeah. Everyone is just like, "Well he was in the chair. He was in the chair all day. And then--"

SHARON: [laughing] "We saw no reason to move him. He's always in the chair!"

CHARIS: So everyone's just like, "Well, but, when did he *exactly* pass away?"

SHARON: And Peter does tell Murbles, he's like, "If you can get the interested parties to just do a settlement, you know? Chop up the money some kind-of way that seems equal, then I would advise that you do that." So, Peter early on is already, you know--it comes out a little bit later that he is already suspecting that something fishy happened with the body, at least.

It's interesting because we've been talking about the sort-of adherence to truth that he has, and how in other books sometimes he takes on a case and then later on has a moment of saying, "Oh, I don't know if I want to keep pursuing this." So, it's interesting to me that before he even takes the case he says to Murbles, like, "Are you *sure* that you want me to go digging? Because once I start I'm not going to be able to stop."

CHARIS: I love the way he describes it to Murbles: "Look here, sir: when you were a boy, did you ever go about poking sticks in things? Into peaceful, mysterious looking ponds, just to see what's at the bottom?" And Mr. Murbles said--[laughs] Oh dear Mr. Murbles is like, "Frequently. I was extremely fond of natural history and had quite a remarkable collection, if I may say so at this distance of time, of pond fauna."

[both laughing]

SHARON: And Peter's like, "That's not the point. The point is did you ever stir up, like, mud and icky things."

CHARIS: Yeah, "Did you ever happen to stir up a deuce of a stink in the course of your researches?"

SHARON: And it is--I mean, Murbles is saying, you know, we could always fall back on a settlement, right? Because I think the Victorian inheritance plot is very much hanging over the background of this book? Like in BLEAK HOUSE, the plot of BLEAK HOUSE really revolves around the Jarndyce v. Jarndyce case, which is all about trying to settle or trying to, like, litigate a will, and then eventually the entire inheritance is just eaten up with the court costs and the cost of litigation so nobody gets anything. So Peter's like, "Yeah, the estate might vanish in costs if the parties do litigate," and Murbles is like, "Yeah, I'm sure they'll want to avoid it, but in the meantime please do some looking into--" [chuckles]

CHARIS: Yeah, I do think it's really interesting that after we've just had UNNATURAL DEATH, where Peter insisted on poking around and it resulted in multiple deaths and attempted murders and the defamation of character of an innocent, sweet old man, that Murbles comes to him with this kind-of juicy question, and Peter's just like, "Okay, so if I do this, I'm going to find something out and that's the answer you're going to get. Are you going to be satisfied with whatever evidence I give you?" And Murbles is just like, "Well yes, yes of course." And then Peter is just like, "Okay... are you *sure*? Because it may be a big stinky mess."

When he's talking specifically about, like, stirring up the pond scum, I feel like that is definitely a reference to UNNATURAL DEATH, because his whole investigative strategy was to stir things up. And it had--

SHARON: It worked! [laughing]

CHARIS: --very dire consequences. [laughing] It worked! But at what cost?

SHARON: Yeah. Well, and in a certain way I think this case--at least the case of the will, really rhymes with that one. Right? I mean, in UNNATURAL DEATH there is no will and that's kind-of the problem. But here we also have a very elderly woman who was estranged from her family, and a young woman who stands to gain from her death. And I think there has to be a way in which, you know, if you are a reader of Sayers and you've been following along in all the mysteries as they've been published, like that would sort-of send up a flare in your brain, right, of like, "Oh! The book last year also--" [both start laughing] Like, I don't know if we're being set-up to sort-of suspect Ann Dorland from the get-go? I mean, we don't--it takes a long time for us to meet her in the book. We're not actually even going to get to her in this episode because she doesn't show up til like the latter half, but-- I don't know. It's really interesting to

me that we're kind-of recurring back to this--I don't know, I keep calling the inheritance plot like a very Victorian trope, but I think it kind-of is. And in some ways I feel like this book, you know--I was going through and trying to find little bits of interesting things to say about, like, the composition, or like the form of it, and I feel on the one hand that it's like *very* conventional, formally. You don't get like all of the inventiveness of, say, WHOSE BODY? But then at the same time I'm like, well but Sayers was like, essentially helping invent the genre of the cozy mystery, so maybe [laughing], maybe I find it very conventional, but, you know, she's just like really settling into a genre. So, I don't know.

But, yeah, there doesn't seem to be a ton to say about, like, *how* the book is put together? Other than the chapter titles are all chess moves.

CHARIS: Oh! Are they?

SHARON: Mmhmm!

CHARIS: I didn't know that.

SHARON: Oh sorry, they're not chess moves, they're like, card--card moves I guess.

CHARIS: Oh!

SHARON: Like card playing: "Lord Peter Leads the Club," "The Queen is Out," I think "Hearts Before Diamonds," something like that. "Hearts Count More Than Diamonds." I guess not all of them. There's one that's "The Curse of Scotland." But.

CHARIS: Huh. Yeah, that never registered with me. I'm noticing that here, live, for the first time.

SHARON: [laughing] You have to go to more clubs and play more cards.

CHARIS: I'm terrible at cards. I don't even know how to play Hearts.

SHARON: Sorry, I think I took us off on a tangent. [laughing]

CHARIS: No, I think that that's fascinating. And makes a lot of sense.

But I do think--obviously, I'm not the expert on modernism on this podcast, but it definitely feels like there's not as much experimentation in that sense.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: But I do feel like Sayers is really digging into the characters more than maybe in the last couple of books.

SHARON: Huh. That's interesting because I feel like we get so little of Peter as a character in this book. But say more about that.

CHARIS: Yeah, not so much Peter. Although I do think we get little bits of Peter reacting to things, but we don't get as much internal Peter as we did in some of the previous books. But I'm thinking more in terms of the other characters.

SHARON: Mmm.

CHARIS: Like, we have George Fentiman and his wife Sheila. And they're both drawn--like they're very thorough character portraits. And they're drawn very carefully. And like, it would be so easy for them to be caricatures, but Sayers draws them with a lot of sympathy and a lot of nuance to kind-of show that these are people.

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: They maybe aren't showing their best sides at the moment--

SHARON: George certainly isn't. [laughs]

CHARIS: No, like, they're not really shown to the best advantage. [laughs] And it's not what you would call a flattering portrait. But it does kind-of show us, like, these are people who have been pushed--

SHARON: Kind-of to the brink.

CHARIS: Yeah. Just like to the very edge of what they can handle. They have been doing their best, but they are unraveling.

SHARON: I think--I think you're really right, in that even if Sayers isn't really using the formal experimentation that we associate with modernism, like thematically and through characterization this book is very very concerned with what happens after a war. Right? What happens after the great war. And I think in that sense does pick up on a lot of the things that other modernists were thinking about. So, going way back to I forget which episode, we talked

about like Paul Fussell and his book THE GREAT WAR AND MODERN MEMORY about how, partially, modernism arises--like, modernism as a literary movement arises from the breakdown of like a language adequate to talk about the horrors of the war?

CHARIS: Mmhmm.

SHARON: And I think here we see a lot of how war affects peoples' relationships, right? So George being gassed and coming back and kind-of not being able to hold down a job because of his nerves and how that affects his marriage, and relationships between men and women as women are entering the workforce. And then also there's like so much, I think, intergenerational conflict that's--it's all talked about in very polite language, but you definitely--like in all the scenes at The Bellona Club, you get this sense that the young men who were part of World War I feel very misunderstood, I think, by the old guard? By the old soldiers who served in previous wars. And there's almost this sense of resentment, right? Of like, these old men sent us into war, told us it would be glorious, and now have completely, just, no understanding of what we endured, what our lives are like now. And so there's really, I think, a big chasm that Sayers is pointing out between the older generation and this younger one.

CHARIS: Yeah. I think that's really true. And also something that she highlights is how it affected different temperments differently. Like Robert Fentiman, the older brother, he almost fits in with the old guard, right? He went to war and had a good time. [Sharon laughs] You know, he's like a brash, loud, naturally suited to the military kind of person. Career military suits him right down to the ground. He's the same generation as his brother but he doesn't understand why his brother has so many issues.

SHARON: Yeah. Murbles even says early on to Peter, "Poor George inherited a weakly strain from his grandmother, I'm afraid." Which is a very [both laughing] Murbles-y thing to say. Of like, [sarcastically] "Oh, it's so unfortunate that the female has passed down this weakness." But Peter immediately responds, "'Well he's nervous,' said Wimsey, who knew better than the old solicitor the kind of mental and physical strain George Fentiman had undergone. The war pressed hardly upon imaginative men in responsible positions." So it's--the narrative is really clear that this isn't--this isn't like a character flaw of George's. Or even of Peter's, because we know that Peter was an imaginative man in a responsible position, and how difficult it was for him.

CHARIS: Mmhmm. Whereas Robert Fentiman just has no imagination. [chuckles]

SHARON: [laughs] None. Well--

CHARIS: None whatsoever.

SHARON: Well, we'll find out he has a *little* bit, but--

CHARIS: Yeah, I guess a little bit. But I don't know. Like, creativity is not the same thing as imagination.

SHARON: That's true, that's true. He's maybe just reactive, right? Everything he does in this book is sort of like reactionary.

CHARIS: Yeah. Which makes sense, because I feel like when--especially when Sayers is talking about the imaginative personality, that's someone who is imagining outcomes, you know? Anticipating outcomes? And--

SHARON: Mmm. And consequences, yeah.

CHARIS: Like, as someone with anxiety, I feel like that can sometimes be so much worse, you know. Like, in general, the thing that I imagine and anticipate is much much worse than whatever actual reality there is to react to. And so, [ruefully] if I weren't so imaginative and were just reacting to things as they happened, I think often I would be so much less stressed.

SHARON: Did you ever read the last book in the ANNE OF GREEN GABLES series? ANNE OF INGLESIDE?

CHARIS: You know, I never did.

SHARON: Oh. It's really good. [laughs]

CHARIS: It's one of those things that I have been meaning to get to for so long, but reading the Anne books as a pre-teen, I got--I wasn't very interested in Anne as a wife and mother, so I burned out on the series and then didn't get to that one. And people are just like, "Oh no, you should read it, it's different from all the other ones. It's kind-of by itself." I'm just like, "Oh, okay, I'll get to it sometime." [sheepishly] And then I have not done that yet.

[both laughing]

SHARON: [teasing] Well I'm not going to assign you more homework.

CHARIS: [mock embarrassed] I still haven't finished my first assignment.

SHARON: That's alright, I haven't even started mine. [laughs] Just endless extensions! [Charis giggling in the background] But--yeah, so the final book in the series, it's about Anne's daughter and it's set during World War I, and it's about her kind-of watching all the boys of her generation and her family go off to war. But it's relevant here because one of her brothers, Walter, is, you know, he's the poet of the family; he's the sensitive soul. And he's the one who--he's *terrified* of enlisting, because he's so imaginative. Because he keeps imagining kind-of like all the horrible things that he's gonna have to bear witness to and be part of. And then much later on, one of the other brothers of the family says to Rilla, "Oh yeah, Walter, you know, once he *got* to the front he was braver than all of us." Like the problem wasn't--you know, he wasn't a coward, it was just that his imagination was so intense that he was like pre-living everything and like imagining every single thing about the situation. Whereas the rest of us were, you know, just sort-of dumb boys who thought we were going off on a lark. And so once--but like once Walter was faced with the *reality*, he was much more able to deal with it. And I think that's kind-of like relevant to what you were saying about the more anxious or nervous personality--not getting worked up, but the--yeah, the difference between Geroge and Robert, I guess, of Robert probably thought the entire war was a lark the whole time he was there. [laughs] Whereas poor George had a constitution maybe more like Peter's and--and as you were saying earlier, has now no outlet, right? He's not aristocratic, he's not--he doesn't have a Bunter in his life to like buffer him from things.

CHARIS: Yeah. And that's something that's *really* shown in this book is what a difference it makes.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: You know like, Peter came home to wealth. He came home to people who could take care of him. He came home and Bunter--we don't know this yet, I guess, in the books--but Bunter kind-of followed him home.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: And while Peter was in the depth of shellshock, Bunter was kind-of running his life and taking care of him. George doesn't have that. George is poor; George has to work to support himself; George does not have the luxury of dropping everything to recover.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: Or, you know like, George doesn't have the free time to take up a hobby to distract his mind. George--George basically has nothing. Like, other than interacting with other veterans at The Bellona Club, George doesn't have any support structure at all.

SHARON: Yeah. And I think there's a way in which the narrative points out--because it's so explicit about what Bunter did for Peter.

CHARIS: Mmhmm.

SHARON: And at some point I think it even... I'm trying to find the page. It refers to Bunter as like motherly? Oh yes. Peter says, "I have an extraordinarily faithful and intelligent man who looks after me like a mother." And he says that to George, so there's a way in which like Bunter-- Bunter's labor is very much set-up as like feminized labor, as nurturing labor.

CHARIS: Mmm.

SHARON: And I think the thing that George resents is that his wife does not do that for him. Right?

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: I mean, he says some *really terribly* misogynistic things.

CHARIS: Yeah, he does.

SHARON: Of like, "No wonder a man can't get a decent job these days with these hard-mouthed cigarette smoking females all over the place pretending they're geniuses and businesswomen." He says that Miss Dorland "paints things; ugly skinny prostitutes with green bodies and no clothes on." Like, it's--he's...he's really, really angry at women. But like, it's very obvious that this comes about because he's angry that his wife -- in her own stress, and needing to go out and work, and trying to keep the family together, and trying to make a living -- doesn't have the emotional or time capacity to then work a second shift on his feelings, right?

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: [laughing] And I can't say I blame her!

CHARIS: Not at all! Like, out of all the people in this book, the person with the rawest deal is Sheila Fentiman.

SHARON: [feelingly] Yeah!

CHARIS: And it's not that Sheila Fentiman *wants* to work outside the home, it's that she *has* to. She doesn't have an option. Because George can't hold down a steady job. Plus they kind-of really seem to need two incomes to make ends meet.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: So, she also doesn't have the luxury of free time. And she also doesn't have any support structure. This poor unfortunate married couple: they both desperately need someone taking care of them and they can't take care of themselves or each other, because they're so busy just scrounging to live.

SHARON: Mmhmm. Yeah, it's very--I mean, we've talked about class difference before, but I think this is one where Peter's really -- [sigh] he's really seeing an experience that is so different from his? I mean, even when he goes and calls on them, right? The book is at pains of saying like-- so, the Fentimans live on the ground floor, there's someone in the basement, and I think there's someone above them. So Peter rings once, which brought up the person in the basement, and then the narrative says, "Whereas a better instructed caller would have rung twice to indicate that he wanted the ground floor." So there's one bell for everybody.

CHARIS: Mmhmm.

SHARON: And, you know, the book is pointing out that Peter doesn't know how it works to call on someone who doesn't live in their own house. [laughs] Like, who shares a bell with other people. Because of course he wouldn't, right?

CHARIS: Right. Well and like they don't just share a bell, like they share the kitchen, I think that they share the [chuckles] "facilities." They have two rooms in this house that they share with at least two other families. And I think that it also makes clear that Peter hasn't been there before. Peter knows them, but he hasn't been to call on them.

SHARON: No.

CHARIS: And kind-of, you know, before he actually gets there, a few pages earlier, Peter is deciding--he's just like, "Oh, I think I'll go see the Fentimans." Then he stops and remembers that if he arrives too early they would have a social responsibility to ask him to stay for supper, and he's just like, "And there might not be enough to go around and that would--everyone

would be putting on a front, but being upset." So he's like, "I'm just gonna wait a little bit."
[laughs]

SHARON: Yeah. And it's very gentlemanly, right?

CHARIS: It is.

SHARON: His concern isn't like, "Oh, they won't be able to feed me," but it's like, "I don't want to embarrass them," or, "I don't want to worry them by taking part of their meal that they've had to scrounge about for." Where Peter could just go to a different club and [laughing] have a very nice meal there.

CHARIS: Yes.

SHARON: Yeah. And it even says that his "simple and satisfactory meal -- which he had at one of his *numerous* clubs -- left him in the best of tempers." [laughing] So there's very much, I think, a pointing out that money can't buy you happiness, necessarily, but it can make unhappiness VERY comfortable. And that there is a sense in which Peter's recovery has a lot to do with the things that his wealth -- like, the comforts that his wealth has brought him. Right? The fact that a good meal can leave you in a better temper, and so--and setting that up directly in contrast with the ill-temper of George and Sheila because of how little they have.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: And I don't know -- I was really noticing this go-around of reading how... I don't think "isolated" is the correct word? Because Peter works with Murbles to some extent in the beginning and there's also, we forgot to mention, there's a doctor at The Bellona Club when they first discover General Fentiman. So Doctor Penberthy, who happens to be the General's personal physician, and who was an army doctor, is like on the scene, and he's the person who, you know, says like, "Oh, I think he's been dead for, you know, maybe a few hours. Like, the rigor mortis is just passing off."

So Peter has interlocutors but he's not-- all the people who usually help him detect are not really around in the first part of this book? So like, Parker doesn't show up until about a third of the way through when Peter goes to ask him to put a police tail on somebody. And even Bunter--so Bunter goes and takes all these pictures of The Bellona Club, but--usually Bunter is the person Peter sends to talk to servants, and in this case Peter talks to General Fentiman's manservant himself; Peter talks to the help at the club himself. So, I feel like there's a way in which this book is really putting Peter right up next to classes of people that he normally would

not--that he would normally be buffered from, I suppose? Or that he normally would assume, like, wouldn't even tell him anything so he would send Bunter or he would send Charles.

CHARIS: Mmhmm. Yeah. It has Peter doing a little bit more of his own work, I guess. [both chuckle] Which, that reminds me of a little thing that I noticed. It's right at the end of Chapter 3, I think, where Peter's decided to take on the case after talking to Murbles. [the rustling of pages can be heard in the background] Oh yeah: so Murbles leaves after Wimsey has agreed to take on the case. So Peter rings the bell for Bunter, and he's like, "A new notebook please, Bunter. Hail Fentiman and be ready to come around with me to The Bellona Club tomorrow, complete with camera and the rest of the outfit." Which I thought was interesting, because I think that this is just about our only glimpse of how Peter organizes his cases.... which is by having Bunter do it. [laughs]

SHARON: [laughing] Yeah.

CHARIS: In general, we just kind-of see him wandering around asking questions and thinking things, but we don't see him, you know, taking notes or things like that. But it's just like, he does, apparently. And I think later on there's a mention of him writing down notes in a notebook. But that's not something that's highlighted very much at all, I think, in any of the books. It's just like, oh yes, he does neatly record all of these things, or have Bunter do it. [both laughing] And I just have this vision of Peter just having all these pieces of paper where he's written things down and Bunter having to, like, catalogue them. [both laughing]

SHARON: It's like that -- you know, academic twitter a few years ago, there was that hashtag that was like, "Thanks for the typing," and it was pointing out how many old male academics - [laughing] and I guess maybe new male academics - in their books are like, "And thank you to my wife for the typing." And everyone's like, "Mmmm. So you mean like, organizing your research, maybe conducting your research, maybe writing the dissertation for you?" [laughing]

CHARIS: [knowingly] Mmhmm.

SHARON: So, thanks Bunter for the typing. [both laugh]

CHARIS: I have another little note on the next page. [laughs]

SHARON: [excited] Oh! Is it when he's asking Bunter about the suit?

CHARIS: [gleefully] Yes.

SHARON: Yeah! [giggles]

CHARIS: And then he's just like, "Are you sure you've removed all the newness? I hate new clothes." [barely contained laughter] What I wrote was, "Oh my God, seriously Peter?" [laughs]

SHARON: And then Bunter says, "Positive, my lord. I assure your lordship the garments have every appearance of being several months old." [laughing] So like, how does Bunter remove the newness?

CHARIS: I'm sure it's by, like, strategic washing.

SHARON: Oh gosh. Which is so much more laborious than if, you know, Bunter just put on his lordship's suit every now and then [Charis laughing in the background] and like, moved around. [laughs] That is a clue though! Don't you think?

CHARIS: I don't know. I feel like that--if it is a clue it's very *subtle* [whispers]. I like, I was reading it where I'm just, ah yes, an example of like, how ridiculously rich and carefree Peter is and just like, "Meh, I have new clothes but I don't want them to *look* new."

SHARON: So, Bunter... yeah. It's like Queen Elizabeth's -- dresser? I guess is what they call her? Like, the person who's in charge of Her Majesty's clothes -- put out a book lately where she's like, "Oh yes, you know, it's very handy that Her Majesty and I have like the same shoe size, because I wear in all her shoes before -- I break in all her shoes before she wears them." [both laughing]

CHARIS: That sounds so nice.

SHARON: Yeah. Peter and the Queen are the same. [laughs]

CHARIS: [laughs] Identical.

SHARON: Mmhmm. What else did we want to talk about?

CHARIS: I'm just kind-of flipping through my notes. [pause] When Peter goes with Penberthy into the library, and there's a description of the library? And I think like we have to save that until the very end, I'm just like, "Oooo, a hint?"

SHARON: Yeah. I do love that the book is always like, "Nobody was ever in the library."

CHARIS: Never!

SHARON: These are not people who sit around and like, read books. [laughs]

CHARIS: Right.

SHARON: I think we can mention that one thing Peter says to Penberthy in that conversation in the library is that he was like, "We both notice that the body was stiff with rigor mortis, but the knee -- his legs--his left leg swung free." Peter's saying to Penberthy like, "We both know that somebody moved the body in a way that like --" I don't know if it's like broke the kneecap, but--?

CHARIS: Mm. Forced the joint.

SHARON: Yes, forced the joint, so that's kind-of hanging in the air. So the question is like, "Who did that?"

CHARIS: And that's kind-of like the thing that gave Peter pause. He's just like, "I know that something was going on. I don't know what it was, but if I dig into this, who knows."

SHARON: Yeah. And then the other sort-of clue--I mean there really are like a bunch of clues that are laid out very early, which I love. This is like a very airtight case. But one thing that Peter says to Robert Fentiman is that the other thing -- like he doesn't mention the kneecap, but he says, "Something struck me as very odd about the body." And then Robert says, "Well, what is it?" [Charis laughs] And then the narrative says, "'Work it out for yourself, my dear Watson,' said his lordship, grinning like a dog. 'You have all the data. Work it out for yourself and let me know the answer.'" And I won't give away, like, what that object is, but it's -- I do kind-of love it when Sayers, like, in playing fair has laid out kind-of everything we need to know, but then very explicitly is like, "Yes, there's something that you as the Reader should have picked up." Which, I never do until, like, after I've read the whole book. [laughing]

But yeah. So there's just like some clues scattered about in the first third of this book that all is not quite as it seems.

CHARIS: Yes. I like, as you say, I like the way that Sayers will show us what Peter is looking at, and then be like, "And now Peter knows something." And you're just like, "What! What does he know?"

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: "Well, you saw the same things he saw, you should figure it out."

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: It's like, "But I--er--what?!"

SHARON: [with mock despair] But I can't!

CHARIS: The thing is that Sayers does follow the rules, as we've talked about many times before. It's not like she said, "Peter looked over there and he saw something and you'll find out what it is later," you know? It's like, "He saw this and this and this and this. And now he knows something."

SHARON: Yes. [laughs]

CHARIS: It's like--we get the specifics.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: And then are left to draw our own conclusions.

SHARON: Yeah. There's a bit in FIVE RED HERRINGS, right, where after he looks at the scene he also remarks to somebody, "Something is missing." And then there's a footnote that's like, "The astute reader will know what it is," or something. It's like *very* explicit there that like, mmm, Peter knows a thing. [chuckles]

CHARIS: Yeah. And then do you ever feel like a little burst of shame? You're just like, "I guess I'm not an astute reader."

SHARON: I literally never remember what it is! [Charis bursts out laughing] In this -- in UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB at least when I get to that point I'm always like, "Oh right! [snaps fingers] That's -- now on re-read I remember the thing." [Charis laughing in the background] But literally with FIVE RED HERRINGS I *always* get to that bit and I'm like, "Ugh! *What is it?*" [laughing] No, I am not an astute reader.

CHARIS: "Well, *what's the thing?*"

SHARON: [laughing] Yeah.

CHARIS: I never figure out what it is--well, to be fair, in my own defense, I don't try very hard. Because I am not the type of mystery reader who is trying to solve the mystery?

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: Like I'm not trying to beat the book to the conclusion, because I know that I'm going to be told.

SHARON: Exactly.

CHARIS: Yeah. Like I read mysteries because I like character portraits and formulaic settings. [Sharon chuckles] Like, to sum up, that's why I can watch LAW & ORDER for so long before getting tired of it, because I love things that have like a formulaic structure, I love genre things, especially things that have like--that follow genre rules and conventions, while still kind-of messing around within that structure.

SHARON: [chuckles] So you *loved* KNIVES OUT when you saw it, right?

CHARIS: I enjoyed KNIVES OUT so much! And I really need to go watch it again.

SHARON: To pick up all the little things.

Just a brief sidenote that one of our Twitter followers responded to, you know, our answer to a question in the listener Q&A, where we were really struggling to come up with books that, you know, sort of replicate the Golden Age mystery plot without the massive amounts of sexism and racism and classism. A Twitter listener pointed out that KNIVES OUT as a movie does that really well.

CHARIS: Yes. And so listeners, if you have not seen KNIVES OUT, definitely consider running out to catch it in theaters before it's gone. And if you do miss it in theaters, make sure you get it on DVD or something. It's delightful. ...Except for that one thing that happens at the very end, [laughs] that I can't describe because of spoilers.

SHARON: I think I know the thing you're talking about. But, offset by Chris Evans in *many* good sweaters. [laughing]

CHARIS: Such good sweaters! [dreamily] Love sweaters.

SHARON: Yeah, maybe telling a little too much about myself, but Oo! Mmhmm. [laughs]

CHARIS: Well I'm right there with you. [Sharon laughing in the background] We're all in this boat together.

SHARON: Okay, good. Good good. [laughing] Oh Captain, my Captain.

CHARIS: No, and I have looked at the internet a little bit and we are not alone in this boat.

SHARON: That's true.

CHARIS: [chuckling] It's a very crowded boat.

SHARON: That's true, that's true.

CHARIS: The boat is overflowing.

SHARON: [laughs] Right. Before--before going, uh -- where were we? [laughing hysterically]

CHARIS: I don't know, now all I can think about is Chris Evans in sweaters! [Sharon still laughing helplessly] What have you done? [laughing] You've completely derailed.

SHARON: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I was distracting you. Oh, right! Yeah, not being the kind-of reader who, like, is trying to figure everything out.

CHARIS: Ohh! Right. Right, right.

SHARON: Yeah. We might need to have our friend Angela on when we talk about FIVE RED HERRINGS because I'm much more of your school of thought, of, I'll feel really good about myself if I've figured something out before the book tells me, but I don't fuss about it?

CHARIS: Yeah, I'm not trying to--'cause I'm just like, "The book's gonna tell me."

SHARON: Mmhmm. Yeah. And then it'll be fun on re-read.

CHARIS: My goal is not to be smarter than the author. My goal is to admire how smart the author is.

SHARON: Mmhmm. A very worthy goal.

CHARIS: Yes. And that is a very attainable goal for me as a reader. [both laugh] So I get to enjoy mysteries without also experiencing repeated blows to my self-esteem. [Sharon laughs]

SHARON: But our friend Angela is like, "The whole point of reading mysteries is to like, see if you're smarter or as smart as the detective." [laughs] So she really loves FIVE RED HERRINGS for that reason.

CHARIS: Yes! She enjoys FIVE RED HERRINGS, she enjoys the timetables, and is -- I'm going to tell an anecdote about Angela. And it involves this, like, not--I'm going to give this without context, to avoid it being a spoiler.

SHARON: Okay.

CHARIS: But at some point in one of the mystery novels of Dorothy L. Sayers, there's a coded letter. And because Sayers is Sayers, she spends several paragraphs explaining how the code works and kind-of like providing all the things needed to solve the code. Right? And I, being the type of reader that I am, go, "That's interesting," and just kept reading because I knew that is was going to be decoded for me --

SHARON: Like very soon.

CHARIS: Yes. So I just happily read on, sure that I was going to know everything relevant soon. Within a few pages. Whereas our friend Angela stopped reading the book, went and got several sheets of paper, and then spent a *while* decoding the letter herself [both laughing] before moving on. And I was just like, "Why? It was decoded on the *next page*." She was just like, "Because I could? Why wouldn't I?"

SHARON: "Because I wanted to know."

CHARIS: [laughing] She was just like, "Because I wanted to do it!"

SHARON: [laughing]

CHARIS: It would not have ever occurred to me to stop and decode. They're gonna tell you what it says in a minute!

SHARON: Yeah. Well, if any of our wealthy relatives ever pass on in shady circumstances we'll ask Angela to come investigate. [laughing]

Can I tell you something really funny about the cover of my book?

CHARIS: Yes, please tell me something really funny about the cover of your book.

SHARON: So, it's another one of the paperbacks from like the Avon series from the 60's, so same style as like the very lurid green UNNATURAL DEATH that I had. (And I'll, likewise, put a picture of this in the show notes.) And on the *back* there's an illustration of General Fentiman dead in the chair, which is like in the style of the other covers. [laughing] But on the *front*, you actually have a photograph of Sir Ian Carmichael as Lord Peter Wimsey, because - as the front cover is at *pains* to tell us - "THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB is now a Masterpiece Theater Presentation, made possible by a grant from Mobile Oil Corporation." [laughing] Like, that's *all* on the front. [Charis laughing in the background]

So, I don't know how much Big Oil paid Avon to have these, like, tie-in covers, but I found that very, very funny, particularly since this book was written in the period of Sayers' life when she was working at the advertising company. So, I feel like she's either spinning in her grave over this, or like, chuckling down at us that the petroleum companies really got into the detective game. [laughing]

CHARIS: It's like, "Look! We care about things like the arts."

SHARON: [completely unconvinced] Yeahhhh, yeah.

CHARIS: "We're not horrible!"

SHARON: Mmhmm. "We support great literature."

CHARIS: Anyway...

SHARON: We may have exhausted what we have to talk about for this early third.

CHARIS: Yeah. I have something that's not directly related to the book, but a little tidbit to throw in.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: So, in our first introductory episode, we both said that we thought that GAUDY NIGHT was our first Sayers?

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: But I couldn't really remember, because it was a *very* long time ago. But I picked up this copy of UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB, and I found in it something that I've apparently been using as a bookmark all these years.

SHARON: Uh-huh.

CHARIS: Which is a little postcard note, and it is from someone from Readerville days. I think it's from Kat Lonergan. And I think that she must have sent me this copy of UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB *before* we read GAUDY NIGHT for Readerville's Young Adult reading group.

SHARON: Oh wow!

CHARIS: So I can't remember if maybe I read this one first? So it might have been that UNPLEASANTNESS was my first Sayers? Or maybe it was just that I owned it first and then I--but I read GAUDY NIGHT first? So I don't know. But I am like holding this book going, "Someone from Readerville sent this to me when I was a teenager, and here I am still holding it," [Sharon laughs], "and doing a podcast about it." I just love that.

SHARON: Yeah.

Thank you so much for joining us for this first episode on THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB. We'll be back in two weeks to talk more about the mystery and some new characters that we'll be introduced to in the next third of the novel. And if you're following along, we'll probably discuss up to the end of Chapter 16 for next time, is the plan. So you can follow along at home.

CHARIS: In the meantime, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram as @wimseypod, and you can find transcripts and show notes of our episodes on our website at asmywimseytakesme.com.

SHARON: 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 love for you to give us a rating and a review on Apple podcast or on your podcaster of choice. And we also hope that you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

CHARIS: Join us next time for more talking piffle.

[THEME MUSIC: jaunty Bach-esque piano notes played in counterpoint begins and gradually fades out]