

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 11 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 going to continue our conversation about the first half of *STRONG POISON*, the fifth Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novel by Dorothy L. Sayers, in which she introduces Harriet Vane. And we're going to be covering the same chapters that we talked about in our previous episode, but we're going to dig into them a little bit more and cover some of the topics that we didn't have time for last time.

SHARON: A Content Warning for our listeners: we do get into the topic of abusive relationships in this episode. We do not talk about physical abuse, but we do talk about potential emotional abuse. So, if that will be difficult at all, we will drop in our show notes the timestamp of when that comes up and you can feel free to just turn off the episode at that point.

CHARIS: So, it is 1930, Harriet Vane has been tried for the murder of her former lover, Phillip Boyes. The trial ended in a hung jury, thanks to Miss Climpson, and Lord Peter has taken up the case to try and clear Harriet Vane's name, because - in the course of watching the trial - he has fallen head over heels in love with her.

SHARON: As one does.

CHARIS: As one does! So, Sharon, we said last time that we would use part of our time in this episode to talk about the ways that *STRONG POISON* kind-of dovetails with details of Dorothy L. Sayers' personal life. So do you want to give our listeners a little bit of a rundown on some of those things?

SHARON: Yeah, definitely! So we've mentioned John Cournos before, I believe in our discussion of *WHOSE BODY?*

CHARIS: [wryly] It was unavoidable.

SHARON: Unavoidable, yeah. Just, you know, hard to talk about otherwise. But Cournos, as far as we can tell, is sort-of the real life progenitor of Phillip Boyes. And as much as, you know, I try to hold biographical readings off at arm's length [chuckles] this one is--it is unavoidable. It just kind-of tackles you. [CHARIS chuckles in the background]

But yeah, Cournos was a man that Sayers knew kind-of in the early 1920s. So really a bit before she was writing WHOSE BODY? and through, I think, about 1924 he was a big part of her life. He was a writer of the kind-of fiction that Phillip Boyes writes, so, you know, experimental -- what some people might call "literary." [CHARIS chuckles heartily] Important - maybe a little self-important...

CHARIS: A little scandalous.

SHARON: Scandalous, yes. Like all about free love and communism, as the judge put it. [both laugh] And, as we've mentioned in the past, Cournos - very similarly to what Phillip Boyes says to Harriet - told Dorothy L. Sayers that he did not believe in marriage. That he would consent to living with her, but he did not want to marry her, he did not want to have children. So it was kind-of this situation where he was saying, "We can have a love affair, as long as you use contraception." And she found the idea pretty intolerable, so they grew apart. He--I think he cut off contact with her; I don't quite remember. I think she ended things but he cut off contact.

In the wake of this very unhappy, failed relationship she takes up with Bill White, who is the laboring motorcyclist mechanic that she ends up having her illegitimate child with. And it's--I think it's 1924/1925ish when Cournos comes back into her life. So, she's had her child at this point; she's placed her child with her cousin, Ivy Shrimpton; nobody in her life really knows that she's had her son. And then -- surprise! -- John Cournos gets married.

CHARIS: [witheringly] Mmmhmm.

SHARON: And who does he marry? He marries a writer of detective fiction - after he'd been horrible to Sayers about the fact that she wrote popular fiction.

So we do have -- we have her half of some letters that they exchanged during this period. I believe she destroyed the ones that he sent her. But it's sort-of funny, you know, at one point she says, [laughing] "You should never write women again, because you don't understand them."

But I think a couple interesting things is like, she, evidently, told him that she'd had a baby. She, I think a little bit spitefully, says, "Why does this astonish you? Just because I refuse to be with you" -- it's sort of like, "don't think so highly of yourself, that I refused to be with you and then decided to do this with someone else." But it's also very sad, because she says, "I betrayed my principles in sleeping with this other man. You've betrayed your principles in getting married." There's just -- I don't know. There's a lot of unhappiness in these letters from 1924 and 1925. And I think at some point they stop corresponding.

Yeah, so by the time she's writing STRONG POISON, it's 1930. She's been married to Mac Fleming for a number of years. She's been working at Benson's, the ad agency. At this point, the Lord Peter novels are really starting to take off. She's been asked to write some short story collections about Peter. She's collaborated with Eustace Barton on THE DOCUMENTS IN THE CASE (which is a different, non-Peter detective story/novel that she publishes around this time). She's starting to become a bit famous. And at this point, for all that we can tell, Cournos is in the past.

But, I mean, I would imagine she's still kind-of reckoning with the impact that he had on her life, right? And I think also at this point both her parents have passed away. So, you know, she's kind-of reaching that point in her life where she's taking stock of her younger years, her youth - her teens and twenties and thirties. And I think, in a lot of ways, those ideas make their way into the book.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: So that's kind-of a five minute rundown.

[both laugh]

CHARIS: And, you know, the fact that Sayers kind-of borrows from her personal biography for the events of this book, that it informs the characters, is something that people have a lot of opinions on. [SHARON laughs] And for me, I just see it as Sayers kind-of treating her own life and her own emotional experiences as a resource. That she's just like, "This is something I know about and this could be interesting. I'm using it."

SHARON: Mmhmm. And it is!

CHARIS: And it is interesting! But it did lead - particularly, I think, after her death, is when her son's existence became public. I mean, obviously he existed prior to that [both laugh], but her will acknowledged him. Which is something that she wasn't able to do publicly prior to that, because her husband objected.

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: So it was only after her death that he was publicly recognized as her son. And so that would have been the first time that the general public knew that she'd had a love affair that resulted in a child.

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: And I think that, since then, that's led a lot of people to go, "Oh, Sayers, isn't she the one who wrote herself into her own detective fiction to marry her protagonist?"

SHARON: Right?

CHARIS: Which is an accusation that I have seen from more than one person on that stunning source of intellectualism, the Internet. [SHARON bursts out laughing] But, for a lot of people, that seems to be the one thing that they think they know about Sayers? That, "Oh, she fell in love with her own detective and wrote herself in to marry him."

SHARON: Right.

CHARIS: And, for one thing, I think Sayers, obviously, liked Peter a lot. You have to like your character if you're going to keep writing so many novels about them.

SHARON: [laughing] Though she did say she was trying to, like, kill him off with marriage in this book. She was tired of him.

CHARIS: Yeah, well I think she was tired of writing the types of Peter novels she'd been writing?

SHARON: Mmhmm.

CHARIS: And then I think this was the start of her kind-of going, "Oh, maybe I could write a different type of mystery novel."

SHARON: Yeah. And I think--I don't think it's coincidence that that kind-of experimentation -- I mean, she's been formally inventive, but in terms of saying, you know, "I want to evolve the characters. I want to evolve the form of the detective novel" -- I don't think it's coincidence that that starts happening as she has some commercial success, right? Because it gives her more latitude to change things up, knowing she has an audience, knowing that at this point in her life she's, financially, much more comfortable. Surprise! Being comfortable financially allows people to take risks!

CHARIS: [laughing] Who would have known that it's easier to reach your full artistic potential when you aren't worried about where your next paycheck is coming from.

SHARON: [mock surprise] Right?

CHARIS: [sarcastically] But Sharon, suffering is so artistic!

SHARON: [laughing] I don't even -- I'm like, I don't even have a sarcastic thing to say to that.
[both laughing]

CHARIS: Yeah, so, we can't speak definitely to what Sayers--like, what her motives were, other than what she herself said after the fact.

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: So, I hate speaking in absolutes about anything. I don't like to make empirical statements about stuff because I just--there are very few things about which I feel I'm an authority. [chuckles] So I'm just like, empirical statements are off the table. But I definitely can say that my very firm opinion is that people who think that Sayers was in love with Peter - or like obsessed with her own creation, or that she based Harriet's biography closely on herself because she wanted to marry her own character - I'm just like, "that, in my opinion, is a lot of hogwash." And I feel like it's really impossible to have read more than maybe one Lord Peter book and still hold that opinion.

SHARON: Yeah. And it's just -- I, you know, dare I say there's maybe a spot of sexism also in that assumption, right?

CHARIS: [cheekily] You might, you might dare! Hmm. [both laughing] You might dare such a thing.

SHARON: I mean, I also don't want to speak too definitively on anything, but one might say...
[laughing]

CHARIS: One might conceivably...

SHARON: Yeah, I just feel like when you read the books and when you read the ephemera and the letters that she's writing around this time, she repeatedly talks about how tired she is of Peter. But, you know, it's just - he pays too well. [laughs] And there's even this letter that I have right in front of me, where she wrote to her publisher, Victor Gollancz. She's aware of the blow back from STRONG POISON, where she's--now she's writing FIVE RED HERRINGS and she says, "well, you know, the readers have grumbled that Lord Peter falls in love and talks too discursively. Here's a book in which NOBODY falls in love and in which practically every

sentence is necessary to the plot, except a remark or two on Scottish scenery and language. Much good may it do them." [both laughing]

So I think, you know, I think one can maybe accuse Sayers of being a little bit spiteful sometimes and using her books to make a point. [laughing] But...

CHARIS: I would just like to say--I'm trying to think about how to say what I want to say that doesn't involve a swear word...

SHARON: Is it, oh, "thank you, early readers..."

CHARIS: Yes! Thank you, whiney early readers, for...

SHARON: ...the fact that we have to read...

CHARIS: ...that we all got punished with FIVE RED HERRINGS. [laughing] It's your fault we had to read so many timetables!

SHARON: Thanks. Thanks everyone.

CHARIS: I mean, speaking of empirical statements, it should be noted that, of course, there are people who do like FIVE RED HERRINGS a lot.

SHARON: Yes. Just neither of those people, you know, host this podcast. [both laughing]

CHARIS: Although we might have someone guest when we do talk about FIVE RED HERRINGS, so that it's not just us going, "Augh!" for the entire time.

SHARON: That's true. We should hear the defense. [laughs]

CHARIS: Yes.

SHARON: But back to this book! I do think--I mean, beyond the obvious Cournos/Boyes Sayers/Harriet connections -- and also, I will add that John Cournos put her into one of his books in a very unflattering way, so. It's just, never make an artist mad, you know? [CHARIS laughs] It doesn't end well for anyone.

CHARIS: No.

SHARON: But I think it's also really interesting that in this book, you know, we see the press again. We pick up on that thread that, much like Ann Dorland, Harriet needs to be acquitted absolutely or this story is going to follow her for the rest of her life. And I do think it's interesting that Sayers seems to be thinking a lot about notoriety at this point, and how scandal can kind-of increase a writers' sales?

CHARIS: Right. Mmhmm.

SHARON: Boyes' books and Harriet's books kind-of sell out immediately, and there's this long conversation about, "Oh, if her publisher knew what was good for them they'd contract her to write more mysteries from prison." But I think that's something that Sayers was just really aware of, right? The potential for the private facts about her life to get out and bring an unwanted publicity. Like, as she's becoming more known. I don't know. I don't know that I had anything interesting to say about that other than, "It's interesting! Look there!" [chuckles]

CHARIS: Well, and especially since her pregnancy happened at the beginning of her literary career, right? And that had to have been terrifying.

SHARON: Yeah.

CHARIS: Because it could really have just absolutely ended everything.

SHARON: Yeah. And it was--I mean, she was pregnant around when she started at the Benson Ad Agency - which, as far as we can tell, was work that she enjoyed, right? She tried being a school teacher, she tried working for a publisher, and Benson's was kind of her first job where they paid her well. She was ... intellectually stimulated. So, there's that aspect too of, no one really knows how she was able to hide her pregnancy, because she worked fairly late into her term. But yeah, the added terror of, not only does she have this sort-of fledgling literary career that's taking off, but any career at all that could have been disrupted.

CHARIS: Which is--it's just another area where, things like that are harder for women than men.

SHARON: Yes. Which this book very much points out.

CHARIS: Yes. Like in the very beginning: the judge is summing up, he mentions that Sir Impey Biggs talked about that. We don't actually hear Impey Biggs speech on the subject, but the judge reminds the jury that it was brought up. And it comes up, you know, again in various ... in the book as well.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And the judge is very like, "I acknowledge that there's a double standard, but, you know, members of the jury, you shouldn't allow that to sway you."

CHARIS: Riiight. And it doesn't stop the judge from -- like, in some ways you could say the judge is kind-of scrupulously fair. Cause he's instructing the jury, and he's saying, "You may think that since she had an immoral life you can judge this about her, but don't take that too much into account because it's not the same as committing murder." So, at the same time, it's like the judge is being really harsh on her for her romantic past experiences, but at the same time he's just like, "It's not the same as committing *murder*." So it's just like, uh, okay?

SHARON: [laughs] Yeah.

CHARIS: Okay? Sure.

SHARON: Yeah. Well, and there's a bit where the... Miss Climpson's Cattery is able to place a typist in Norman Urquhart's office because the head clerk mentions like, "Oh, we had this young lady clerk. I don't say she wasn't a good worker, but a whim comes over her and away she goes to get married and there she goes leaving me the lurch just when Mr. Urquhart is away. Now a young man, marriage steadies him, makes him stick closer to his job, but with a young woman it's the other way about. It's right she should get married, but it's inconvenient ..." And it's like...

CHARIS: And it's also not fair, because women couldn't be married and work--

SHARON: EXACTLY!

CHARIS: --in most professions. [laughs wryly]

SHARON: Exactly. The marriage bar was still very much in place, where the moment a woman became a wife it was like, "Okay, well now you belong at home," and -- not that people acknowledged pregnancies in public, but you certainly couldn't be, like, out and about while pregnant. And once you were a mother, it just -- yeah, like, everything about that statement is so unfair, I just drew angry faces.

CHARIS: [emphatically] Right? It's like he's saying that "A man getting married would stick closer to his work, but a woman getting married--" like, she doesn't have the option to stick closer to her work!

SHARON: Right! Because you've made an assumption about how flighty she is and kicked her out!

CHARIS: Yeah!

SHARON: Ugh. Makes me mad.

CHARIS: Yeah.

SHARON: I guess the one saving grace for Mr. Urquhart's [laughs] sexist clerk is that it does leave an opening for one of the Cattery women, and we find out later that a Miss Murchison is henceforth dispatched to be the new typist. But I think--I mean, you and I were really talking earlier about how much this case depends, or at least Peter, in this case, depends on the help of women to secure not only clues and evidence but really any information at all, right?

CHARIS: Yeah, that's very true. Peter relies on Miss Climpson to make the case possible. He relies on Miss Murchison from the Cattery to give him some very important information that we'll get into in the second half of the book, as well as relies on Miss Climpson for some important acts of detection. [chuckles]

SHARON: It's so funny! I can't wait to talk about that part!

CHARIS: I know! That'll come up more in the second half of the book. But he also relies on our old friend Marjorie that we met in *THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB*. And when we were talking about *THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB*, we talked a little bit about how in some ways Marjorie feels like she's being set up as a potential love interest for Peter. They obviously have a very friendly relationship. They know each other pretty well, like well enough that Peter will just go around and show up and just hang out with her. And they seem like they could have been a very comfortable match, but Sayers doesn't go that direction. In the very next book she introduces Harriet Vane.

And Peter once again goes to Marjorie because he needs access to the artistic side of London society, because he needs to meet people that Harriet Vane and Philip Boyes would have known. And I think it's interesting that in the book in chapter 8, it says, "When Wimsey had any researches to do in Bohemia, it was his custom to enlist the help of Miss Marjorie Phelps. She made figurines and porcelain for a living and was therefore usually to be found either in her studio or in someone else's studio." And then it says, "It was true that there had been passages about the time of the Bellona Club affair between her and Lord Peter which made it a little embarrassing and unkind to bring her in on the subject of Harriet Vane. But with so little time

with which to pick and choose his tools, Wimsey was past worrying about gentlemanly scruples."

So... well that certainly implies that Peter and Marjorie were a... I don't want to say 'fling,' because that seems a little bit--

SHARON: Like we don't know for sure.

CHARIS: Right, like we don't know to what extent they had a relationship. But it seems like maybe there had been overtures. Maybe there had been something a little more concrete that petered out. BUt they've obviously stayed good friends, but Peter obviously feels it would be just a little bit...

SHARON: Indelicate.

CHARIS: Indelicate, yeah, to bring Marjorie in on behalf of someone else that he has decided he wants to marry.

SHARON: Is 'the one'! Is 'the only woman'! [laughs]

CHARIS: Yes, the one and only woman.

SHARON: Mmm. [sympathetically and a little exasperated] Never say that Peter takes the easy route on anything.

CHARIS: No absolutely not. The hard way!

SHARON: Yes, of course Peter decides to fall madly in love with the one woman who is in this impossible situation! But he goes to Marjorie, regardless.

CHARIS: Right. He goes to Marjorie for assistance, and Marjorie is delighted to hear from him, and agrees to take him around to meet the players in the field. Because he wants to meet Vaughan. Vaughan is Philip Boyes' best friend, which Marjorie describes Vaughan as "a hanger-on and a house dog."

SHARON: He's *terrible*.

CHARIS: He's so... oohhh my goooosh. He's the kind of person where you read about him on the page, and you're just like oh, he has clammy hands. [SHARON laughing in the background] You imagine shaking hands with him and it would be just like holding a dead fish.

SHARON: Just everything about him is moist. He reminds a lot actually of... well, maybe not Vaughan himself, but the relationship? The hero worship that he has for Boyes really reminds me of the Mary Whittaker/Vera Findlater relationship from UNNATURAL DEATH, where one person really holds all the power, right? Where it's really clear that Philip Boyes held all the power as the *artiste* and the genius. Vaughan even makes a sort of not even very subtle hint that once he clears up, once he's finished editing Philip's books--because, I guess, the copyright or the literary estate was left to him--he's going to commit suicide. So that's... I think on the one hand, yes the clammy hands, but I think Sayers is also pinpointing something that does happen in creative, artistic circles, where a very charismatic man will collect a group of people to be his worshipers. And it certainly hasn't made Vaughan very happy, it didn't make Harriet happy. And that's sort of the catastrophe that Philip's left in his wake.

CHARIS: Yeah, which Vaughan provides an interesting contrast from Harriet, right? Because Vaughan is everything that Philip Boyes wanted from him. Which is a worshipful attendant, basically. And Harriet agreed to her relationship with Philip Boyes. My impression is that she agreed to it with the impression that it was a partnership. And once she saw that he'd just been testing her and stringing her along, she saw him for what he was, which is a pillock.

SHARON: An odious little man.

CHARIS: An odious little man! And ditched him for good. Even to the point where she seems to not quite know what she saw in him. Peter asks her, "Did you love him?" And she goes, "I must have, mustn't I?"

SHARON: Yeah. I... I can relate. I feel like... I don't know, maybe this will get cut after I say it, but I feel like I'm the type of person where it takes me quite a while to be pushed to that point? But there is a... I don't know, I guess this a little Mr. Darcy-esque, but [chuckling] "my good opinion once lost is lost forever."

CHARIS: No, I understand that too. 'Cause you know, this isn't something that only happens with romantic relationships, right? In all relationships there's that potential to feel really close to someone and to put a lot of yourself into the relationship and to give them all your emotional resources. And then realize that it wasn't reciprocal. And once you've realized that person doesn't care about you the way you care about them, the sense of betrayal is pretty destructive. I'm thinking specifically about one friendship I had. I thought I was close to this

person. We talked all the time. I thought we had a close friendship where I could rely on them, and I would have done a lot for them. And then they did something horrible and didn't care at all about how I felt about it. And in retrospective I realize that person was probably a huge narcissist, who hides it under pretending to be a nice person, but everything they do is about themselves. And it's a little bit painful to look back and be like, how was I so fooled? But it's really... you know, it's not that hard to be tricked.

SHARON: No. And that's what narcissists *do*. They're brilliant when you first meet them. The painful thing is when you feel like you approach the relationship in good faith.

CHARIS: Yeah! And then they make a fool out of you. Which is exactly what Harriet Vane says about Philip Boyes, that he made a fool of her.

SHARON: And it's interesting, 'cause when Peter and Harriet are talking about that relationship, the thing she brings up that she found intolerable was that he expected her to worship him, to be at his feet, to not have a self outside of him, Peter quotes that same line from Milton that Miss Climpson had said to Vera Findlater. "He for God only, she for God in him." And he comes to the same conclusion that Miss Climpson did, that that's not a healthy relationship. Whether it's a romance, whether it's a friendship, no human being should have that much power over another.

And to me it's like... I kind of go back and forth when I read this book of like, *is* Peter... is he playing fair? Like, is it, now with the hindsight of many, many years and multiple feminist movements, is it a little bit gross that he keeps badgering her to marry him? But I think *that* statement and some stuff that comes later in the book that we'll probably talk about next time kind of saves it for me. That even early on he recognizes what an impossible situation it is and that similar to Sayers wrote about it later, there's no way she can accept him and keep her self-respect intact. And he doesn't want that kind of relationship. He doesn't want for him to be the genius and for her to be the satellite. Part of the reason he likes her so much is because he recognizes her strength and her artistic output and that she has a self that's so separate from him.

Speaking of things that get picked up from UNNATURAL DEATH... lesbians!

CHARIS: Lesbians! Harold, they're lesbians.

SHARON: So after Marjorie takes Peter to the salon and he meets the terribly clammy Mr. Vaughan, they go and they find two friends of Harriet's!

CHARIS: Yes, these are the two friends that Harriet went and stayed with after she left Boyes and before she got her own flat, so they're obviously good friends to her 'cause they're people she can turn to in a crisis. And they're not at any of the salons, because Sylvia has hurt her ankle. So Sylvia and Eiluned are having a quiet evening at home when Marjorie brings Peter to call on them, and they are delightful.

SHARON: They're so great. I love how much they just... like the very first thing Eiluned says is, "Can he drink coffee, Marjorie, or does he require masculine refreshment?" [both laughing]

CHARIS: I love Eiluned.

SHARON: I know. She's so great. So Sylvia and Eiluned are a couple--

CHARIS: It's *heavily*, heavily, heavily, heavily, heavily implied, but not said outright because I suppose that would have brought censorship down on the book. But we can say with great confidence that they are a couple.

SHARON: And they have a lovely little chat. You know, you'd brought up last time the theme of intuition that kind of runs through this book. And that Peter has this intuition about Harriet, that Miss Climpson has the same intuition. And I do think that intuition both socially is often linked as being a kind of feminine trait, right? And even in this book it's a thing that binds Peter more closely to the women in this book than to Parker and the police, sort of 'nothing but the facts' [attitude]. And it comes up again in this conversation, where Eiluned blithely says, "Sylvia's theory is that Urquhart did it." And Peter's like that's interesting, why? "'Female intuition,' said Eiluned bluntly. 'She doesn't like the way he does his hair.' 'I always said he was too sleek to be true,' said Sylvia, 'and who else could it have been?'" Yeah, I'm just going to put a slight pin into that conversation for later, but I think there's very much this way in which unlike Philip Boyes, unlike Vaughan, unlike even Parker, unlike John Cournos, the women of this book, and Peter, understand women. And understand motivation--*human* motivation.

CHARIS: Right, not just female motivation. Like at this point the promising theory that Peter's pursuing is that Boyes committed suicide. And Sylvia's saying she can't believe Philip Boyes would do that, because "'He talked such a lot,' said Sylvia. 'He really had too high of an opinion of himself. I don't think he would have wilfully deprived the world of the privilege of reading his books.'" [SHARON laughs]

But yeah, I really think in this book we see the women around Peter being observers of human nature, and that being very important. Miss Climpson refusing to budge on the jury was all about her intuition based on observing Harriet Vane in the dock. Her entire argument was she's

allowed to take the prisoner's demeanor into account; that's part of the evidence. And that she finds it impossible to find in Harriet's demeanor that she did it.

SHARON: I forget if it's Miss Climpson or someone else who makes the observation that that's not human beings work. The humiliation that Harriet felt after realizing that Philip Boyes was testing her the whole time... she wanted to go away. She never wanted to see him again. And that's a more human impulse than coming up with this very, very elaborate plan to murder him, because then they would *forever* be linked. And she didn't want to have any connection with him anymore.

CHARIS: I want to reference this little part in this scene with Eiluned and Sylvia. It's one of my favorites. Sylvia is trapped in her seat because of her ankle, so Eiluned is doing the hostessing. So she's filling the tea kettle. "'No thanks,' she said, as Wimsey advanced to carry the tea kettle. 'I'm quite capable of carrying six pints of water.'" [both laugh] "'Crushed again!' said Wimsey." And Sylvia says, "'Eiluned disapproves of conventional courtesies between the sexes.' 'Very well,' said Wimsey amiably, 'I will adopt an attitude of passive decoration.'" Which is, that's one of my favorite lines.

SHARON: Mine too. I love that Peter is so game. You and I have talked before, I don't remember if it actually made it into an episode, that there is something a bit fluid about his gender performance, right? He's not threatened by strong women. He's not threatened by stepping out of the traditional roles that men and women are assigned.

CHARIS: I think this is something that's going to come up more in later books when we sometimes get to see Peter from Harriet's perspective. You'll probably be able to guess what specific part of GAUDY NIGHT is coming to mind for me.

SHARON: [long breathy sigh] Ahhhhh, yeeeesss. [both laugh] I will attempt not to spontaneously combust when we talk about that bit in, I don't know, a year or so.

CHARIS: Yeah, someday when we get there! But it's not that Peter is not very masculine. Even in the very first book, as we talked about with WHOSE BODY?, he spends a lot of that book being the silly ass and then he has that final confrontation where he goes to see Freke, and it's like, oh, he's actually physically powerful, and he's capable of dealing with a physical threat. And it's not just that he's an intellectual. And throughout the books we see Peter being comfortable in all types of company, and I think that ties into that Peter knows who he is. And that makes it possible for him to just be comfortable wherever he is, because he doesn't need other people to tell him who he is. He doesn't need the behavior of other people to reinforce anything about himself. Because he knows! So he doesn't need other people to let him be a manly man,

because he knows who he is and what he's capable of, and so he doesn't need anyone to cater to his masculinity.

SHARON: Which, I think partially is a unique thing to Peter, right? Because we've talked about how Lady Mary Wimsey tries on these personas, and I'm not convinced that Gerald even has an interior, so how could he know himself? [both laughing] But another strand I want us to look out for as we continue in the books is that... something I think the narrative increasingly points out is that part of the reason Peter can know himself or to move through the world comfortably, is because of the massive amounts of privilege he comes from.

CHARIS: Oh yes, absolutely.

SHARON: The ancestral name. The knowing his place within the nobility and his family and so forth, it cannot be discounted, you know... much as financial security can make people more comfortable in taking artistic risks, financial security can just make people more *comfortable*.

CHARIS: More comfortable in general.

SHARON: Yeah, more comfortable in the world, more comfortable in their own skin, because Peter's... even in this book, right, he brings up his own failed love affairs. He brings up Barbara who, if you read the ephemera around the books, is a woman he fell in love with when he was quite young and the implication is her family really wanted her to marry him and then she goes and marries someone else behind his back. And it's sort of his first big heartbreak, and he joins up for the war after that, etc., etc. But there is no harm to his reputation. That's what men of his background are expected to do, is take up with bohemian artists, and it's *fine*. Versus that tightrope that Harriet has to walk.

CHARIS: Peter even says that to Harriet when she says wouldn't it be harmful for you to be attached to me. And he's just like Nope, no one can do anything to me. Not even my family, because they would close ranks with me before cutting me off.

SHARON: Yeah. I want to quote that. It's at the end of the book. It's not really giving anything away, but she says, "You've got a family and traditions, you know. Caesar's wife and that sort of thing." And the quote that Harriet's referring to is that Caesar's wife must be above reproach. The wife of the great man must be pure and chaste and this and that. And Peter says, "Blast Caesar's wife! And for the family traditions, they're on my side, for what they're worth." That's the whole thing. The tradition was made by and for men like him and will never cast him out.

CHARIS: Right. All the privilege is on his side. All the power is on his side. And so he's making the point that he doesn't have to be afraid to be with who he wants to be with.

SHARON: But she does!

CHARIS: But she does. Whereas her whole life has been about that. And you know, she's had this experience where she chose to be with someone against social norms. And the choice to be intimate with someone outside of marriage was not the one that she wanted, it was one she was talked into. But it also meant that she felt she had to cut herself off from her family and friends and from people she knew would be offended by her lifestyle. Which, knowing that both of her parents are dead, knowing that she doesn't have a lot of relations, when it says that she cut herself off from family and friends, that means she cut herself off from her entire past, probably.

SHARON: So it doesn't come up in this book that Harriet graduated from Oxford, but we'll find out later in GAUDY NIGHT that she felt she had to cut herself off from her intellectual community as well.

CHARIS: Yeah, so she gave up a lot for Philip Boyes, only to be... I can't find where it was, but she tells Peter she couldn't stand being treated like an office boy and being put on probation. She sacrificed so much to be treated like an office boy and to her mind at this point that damage is irrevocable. The damage is done. The harm to her reputation is permanent, especially now after this sensational trial. And I think it's pretty clear in her conversation with Peter that neither of them is able to grasp what the reality is for the other one. Like Harriet is unable to imagine how Peter is so wildly confident.

SHARON: And that it wouldn't be an enormous scandal for them to be together.

CHARIS: And Peter just continues to refuse to believe how impossible their relationship is from her perspective.

SHARON: Yeah. Ugh, it's just so good. Even though we don't get a lot of Harriet in this book, I just feel like this whole situation is just so heartbreaking. You just get these little glimpses. She says, "I really was meant to be a cheerful person. You wouldn't know it to see me now." You get these little glimpses of how afraid she is to even admit that she is attracted to him. Like at one point he just sort of offhandedly alludes to "Oh yes, after Barbara," oh gosh, what does it say... Yeah, he brings up Barbara and the narrative just says "'Who is Barbara?' asked Harriet, quickly." So there's a little bit of a, oh, I'm trying to put you off, you can't possibly be in love

with *me*... but I don't want you to be in love with anyone else! And then it's really funny because Peter's preening a little bit, and namedrops that he went to Balliol.

But there's also that delightful little bit that comes prior to that visit perhaps... In chapter seven he goes to see her, and he's getting information from her, but they kind of go off on this little bit of... co-creation?

CHARIS: They kind of brainstorm together.

SHARON: Yeah! She says "I had this silly plot in my mind."

CHARIS: [chuckles] Which I love the way he leads into that. He's like, "'I thought of a good plot for a detective story!' 'Really?' 'Tophole, you know, the sort people that bring out and say 'I've often thought of doing it myself, if I could only find the time to write it.' I gather that sitting down is all that is necessary for producing masterpieces.'"

SHARON: Yeah, Sayers is definitely verbatim recording things that people have said to *her*. [both laugh] "If only I had time!" Harriet says this plot is about a girl who writes novels. She has a friend who also writes. They're not bestsellers. So the friend makes a will leaving his money to the girl, and the girl thinks, "If I polish him off in the manner I use in my latest crime thriller, then we'll both become bestsellers." And they have this lovely banter, just back and forth and back and forth, and Wimsey kind of gets carried away. And at one point it says "She faced him with dancing eyes." So she's actually having *fun*. They're creative equals. They're partners in this scene. And Peter says at the end, "See here, you're not safe. You're too clever by half. But I say, it's a good plot, isn't it?" And she says, "It's a winner! Shall we write it?" "By Jove, let's."

You're just given this sense so early on that she *is* the woman for him, and that he's the man for her, and then it just... takes... [simultaneously with CHARIS saying in a strangled voice: Sooooo long] soooooo many books to get any kind of resolution to this plot! [laughing helplessly]

CHARIS: Just ages and ages. And we love all of it but it takes SO LONG.

SHARON: Yeah. Thank you, early readers, that the *very next book* is the TRAINS. I'm just so mad about that. Oh and we get that great tidbit in this part that Boyes resented Harriet for making about four times what he was [making]. Which apparently was another thing pulled from Sayers' life. Her husband it seems made very unkind remarks about her career, because she was the breadwinner.

CHARIS: She did have two jobs. She was writing and working at the ad agency. I need to doublecheck this to see if I'm correct, but I wonder if some of UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB drew on Mac Fleming as well because didn't he have post-war health issues?

SHARON: I think so... I know he had health issues. I don't remember if they were from the war or not, but possibly.

CHARIS: I may be misremembering, but I do believe he had issues that were due to the effects of the war. That's not something we brought up in UNPLEASANTNESS because I forgot about it until just now.

SHARON: But yeah, the George and Sheila bits. I don't think it was ever that bad? Because the George and Sheila bits are *really* bad.

CHARIS: Really bad. But the fretfulness and kind of casual spitefulness.

SHARON: Mmhmm, the resentment of the working wife and all that. Came from somewhere!

CHARIS: Came. from. Somewhere. Which. Speaking of resentful men, before we close out our conversation in this episode, I want to touch on something that happens near the end of chapter eleven, which is our halfway point where we decided to stop. Peter has read the proofs of Harriet's new novel, the one that she was researching poisons for. And it's a book that's about two artists who live in Bloomsbury and lead an ideal existence in poverty blah blah blah until someone unkindly poisoned the young man. And it says "Wimsey ground his teeth and went down to Holloway Gaol where he very nearly made a jealous exhibition of himself. Fortunately his sense of humor came to the rescue when he had cross-examined his client to the verge of exhaustion and tears." I'm just like, oh, poor Harriet.

SHARON: Poor Harriet. Has someone written the fan fiction of Harriet in jail?

CHARIS: Ooh, I don't know!

SHARON: Like the side-along novel for STRONG POISON?

CHARIS: I don't know, 'cause I never read Sayers fan fiction, so I don't know. Though that would be such an interesting idea for one.

SHARON: Well, listeners, if you read Sayers fan fiction and if there's a good one that tells the events of this book from Harriet's point of view, we would love to be sent a link.

CHARIS: It's so weird. There are some things that I read fan fiction for and some things that I don't, and I think I tend not to read fan fiction for books?

SHARON: Mm, well the voice... I feel like Sayers' voice in particular is so hard to match. I haven't even read the Jill Paton Walsh continuations, because I just can't imagine someone being able to do this.

CHARIS: Yeah, I haven't read them either, for that reason.

SHARON: Were you the one telling me that Stephen King wrote a Wimsey fan fiction? Were you the person who horrified me with that piece of information?

CHARIS: Yes! That was me! I was going to do more research into that, and then I forgot about it. But yes, according to something I saw somewhere on the Internet, he wrote a continuation that sounded horrible.

SHARON: I wish you could see my face right now.

CHARIS: [laughing] I can imagine. But to pull it back to STRONG POISON...

SHARON: Right, right. *This* book. This book that we're talking about!

CHARIS: Peter admits to Harriet that he's "damnably jealous" of Boyes. And Harriet says, "That's just it, you always would be." And Peter says, "If you married me, I shouldn't be jealous"--

SHARON: "because then I should know that you really liked me" [exasperated chuckle]

CHARIS: But Harriet is just completely unable to believe that Peter would ever be happy in their relationship. She says, "You would never really trust me, and we should be wretched." And she also says, skipping down a paragraph, she says, "You couldn't give me a square deal. No man ever does." It's just like [makes slightly tortured sound]. And it's clear that Harriet likes Peter. She sometimes enjoys the time that they spend together in this book, which all takes place in the interview room of a prison. So if you can make someone have a pleasant time with you in that situation--

SHARON: [laughing] Right?

CHARIS: But she's also unable to trust him, and she believes that he would never be able to fully trust her, and it's just so sad! You mentioned the part earlier where Harriet says to Peter that she was actually meant to be a cheerful person, and I think the narrative actually says that she says that with tears in her eyes?

SHARON: Yeah! Yeah, it's actually in this same scene.

CHARIS: As you said, we don't get a lot of Harriet in this book, but I think that what we do get is really strong character writing. There's so much under the surface of Harriet in this book. We don't spend any time from her perspective. We're only seeing her from Peter's point of view and then secondhand from other characters' points of view, so we are in some ways very distanced from Harriet. But it's just heartbreaking how much we see that she's someone who has been badly hurt, who's had her faith in the world and in people so badly shattered. It makes perfect sense that she is not prepared to enter into another relationship.

SHARON: That line where she says "I used to piffle rather well myself, but it's got rather knocked out of me. You know, I was really meant to be a cheerful person. All this gloom and suspicion isn't really me, but I've lost my nerve somehow." It... this is a trauma, right? In many ways, when we get there, I'm really interested in reading *HAVE HIS CARCASE* and *GAUDY NIGHT* as sort of post-trauma texts. I think there's lots in the narratives of both those books that lend themselves [to that reading]. But I think Harriet is really pinpointing that one of the griefs you emerge with from trauma, especially trauma that comes from events that aren't of your own creation, is that you become a different person, right? You lose the person that you were before. And it's not to say that you can't emerge stronger or still with a sense of humor or this or that, but there is this aspect of 'The person that I was is *gone*.' And I think that's very much lingering in the background for her. That she was a person with strong ideals. She's *still* a person with strong ideals! But through this experience of being forced to betray her own ethics and now being associated with this whole mess, and with the fear that she's never going to be able to disentangle herself from it... I think that's part of her grief. Like, I was a cheerful person, I'm meant to be a cheerful person, but I don't know if I'm ever going to find my way back there.

CHARIS: And I kind of want to say that I don't think only her experience of being in prison and tried for murder... that's not the only part of it that's trauma, you know? The Boyes relationship itself was a source of trauma. It was a traumatic experience for her before Boyes ever died. She was already living a post-trauma life, and now that trauma has been amplified exponentially.

SHARON: Yeah. As much as we see their relationship from the outside and the later books really allude to it only obliquely, I think there's a case to be made that it was an emotionally abusive relationship. And that their sex life was certainly never very satisfying for Harriet.

CHARIS: Yes, and from what we know about Philip Boyes, it doesn't seem likely that any relationship with him would not be abusive? Because I think it's probably true with anyone with a streak of narcissism, if everything is about them and they are incapable of prioritizing the wants and needs of other people, it would take deliberate action on his part to not be emotionally abusive. So unless he said, oh, I'm a narcissist, I need to work to overcome these tendencies by being...

SHARON: Better

CHARIS: Yeah, or by being deliberately loving and careful with the people around me, then fundamentally, he's always going to be abusing and taking advantage of the people around him.

SHARON: Yeah, and he certainly didn't seem to have that sort of self-knowledge.

CHARIS: Did not. And it is interesting that we do meet people in the book that had positive perspectives of Philip Boyes, right? The cook and the housemaid in Mr. Urquhart's household had sort of positive ideas about Philip Boyes. They thought that he was friendly and pleasant.

SHARON: Well, that's the thing about narcissists, right? Or abusers. They don't abuse everybody.

CHARIS: Yeah. And they're nice to people until they have them pulled into a place where they have all the power. The abuse doesn't begin until the power's in place.

SHARON: Right. Up until then it's all love-bombing. And I wonder... it never occurred to me until just this moment, but I wonder if that's also why Harriet is so suspicious of Peter?

CHARIS: Ooooh, yeah!

SHARON: Because we never see the prehistory of her relationship with Boyes except that Sylvia or Eiluned or somebody says "he hounded her to death" about taking up with him.

CHARIS: He definitely pursued her.

SHARON: Mmhmm. And so I wonder if part of the trauma and part of the 'I'm not going to let myself get stuck in a situation like that again' is that she's... I mean Peter is coming in *really* being an ass, right? Like "You're the only woman for me!" "It would be so great!" This, that, the other. "I want to marry you!" And no wonder, probably all of her nerve endings are going

[makes extended panicked noise] this is all terribly familiar, I *cannot* be with a man who says I'm the only woman, no woman has ever been like you, 'cause that's just *textbook*, right?!

CHARIS: Right. And the fact that he's sincere and he means it, doesn't make it less suspicious.

SHARON: Exactly. Yeah.

CHARIS: Yeah. So that wraps up our conversation for today. In two weeks we're going to be back and we're going to talk about the conclusion of STRONG POISON, so we'll be going from chapter twelve to the end. We're going to do our best in the next episode not to give away the dunit, but we will be talking about the events of the whole book, so some things that may be spoilers if you haven't finished the book itself, minus the actual whodunnit. And we hope that you will join us again!

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 enjoyed this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me, we'd be really grateful if you'd give us a rating and leave us a review on iTunes or on your podcatcher of choice. We also hope you'll tell all of your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

SHARON: See you next time for more talking piffle!

[theme music starts and gradually fades out]