

As My Wimsey Takes Me, Episode 13.5 transcript

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

SHARON Hello and welcome to As My Wimsey Takes Me. I'm Sharon Hsu...

CHARIS And I'm Charis Ellison. Today we're going to have a special episode for you. We're not going to be talking about one of the novels, but we have an episode with a guest on a special subject. Before we get into that though, the world has changed... a lot, Sharon, since the last time you and I spoke because we recorded several episodes in advance. And since that time, the world has turned upside down, really.

SHARON Yeah. It seems both like a million years ago that we recorded those STRONG POISON episodes and also the blink of an eye.

CHARIS Yeah. I've seen a lot of people say that it felt like March went on forever and now April is just vanishing like water down a drain. And that feels very accurate.

SHARON I have a coworker who keeps saying time is just a flat circle now. I feel like that is very apt. So yes we are both sheltering in place. And we hope many of our listeners are too.

CHARIS Yes. And if you're not, if you're an essential worker, if you aren't able to stay at home, we hope that you're staying very safe. And we're thinking of you.

SHARON We really are. Yeah. And you know, I think there's always this feeling when world events like this happen, of what things feel frivolous and what things feel really necessary. And, and in many ways a podcast does feel like a frivolity, but we hope that if you're a listener of our show that these episodes about cozy mysteries can provide a bit of a solace or an escape right now.

CHARIS Yeah. And whenever there's some world event, there's always that feeling of guilt, you know, like what can I do? And it feels very strange that the best thing for us to do is stay home. Don't do anything.

SHARON Yeah. I've said this a couple of times to people, but social distancing really kind of goes against every instinct I have in a crisis. I tend to be a "gather everybody for dinner, mobilize the community" type of personality in crisis. And so it's been really strange to just kind of be hunkering down at home with my spouse and, you know, I'm still working remotely pretty much full time. So I'm, I'm thankful for the job, but yeah, it's been very isolating. I'm glad to hear your voice, Charis!

CHARIS I am glad to hear your voice as well.

SHARON     Yeah. How are, how are things affecting you? Like, are you working still?

CHARIS     I am working a little bit. As you and our listeners know, I work in a public library and our library is closed for the safety of our community. And we don't know when we'll reopen to patrons, but the library staff, in order to keep everyone on the payroll, because you know, people need to be paid in order to get by... so the staff is going in and working on projects. Some people have been inventorying and moving shelves and things like that. I personally have been working on some big displays that go with our summer theme and hopefully we'll be able to reopen it at some point in the summer so that they can be used. But we're being careful to kind of stay apart and have space in between people and only going in three days a week. So I'm still working, but as you know, Sharon, our listeners don't know, but I live with my parents who are both vulnerable. They're both immunocompromised. So we're being very careful. And my sister who also lives at home, the two of us have been, we've been like aggressively guarding our parents.

SHARON     I bet. Good. I'm glad to hear that.

CHARIS     Um, and our, our parents, they have started to get a little fractious and rebellious.

SHARON     Oh, how the tables have turned! I do feel like we're all, all of us Millennials are telling our Boomer parents, like, no, you really do have to stay at home. I think my parents, because, you know, we still have family ties in Asia, in both China and Taiwan, I think in some ways they were maybe mentally... a little bit more prepared than many other people's parents? They in fact started sheltering in place even before there were any sort of county or state mandates. My parents live in Georgia, but my mom was texting me even before the San Francisco Bay Area shelter in place came down to start working from home and stuff. It's also very cute because she also texted me like, did you know that you can have groceries delivered through these services? [both laughing] And I was like, Oh, welcome to the twenty-first century, Mom! [laughing]

CHARIS     Your mom is so precious. I love her.

SHARON     She is precious. But yeah, I'm glad to hear that your family is safe and healthy. And I hope your parents don't try to sneak out on you.

CHARIS     No, we have blocked their cars in and my sister took away their car keys and we were careful to park behind them in the driveway. And mostly it's kind of like, we have a good laugh about it, about how we're their... their jailers. But also there is a part of it that's like, no, this is very serious. Like we really mean it. And we bring the groceries in and we're just like, you don't touch the groceries. We wipe down the groceries and put them away. We wipe down the kitchen. You don't get to do this.

SHARON     So really they should be enjoying that!

CHARIS        Except the funny thing is that my mom was trying to convince me that she needs to go to the grocery store because she's very much an instinctive shopper. Like she makes a list, but then she really supplements the list by seeing things and remembering, Oh, I'm going to make that. So she just really wants to do that. And I'm like, You may not.

SHARON        You could try a video call, I guess, while you're in the store with her. But that sounds like a nightmare. And I'm sure she would do the like, no, but I need to, to feel the produce and--

CHARIS        Yeah. And you're working full time from home. Is your spouse working?

SHARON        Yes.

CHARIS        So you're both full time from home.

SHARON        We are both full time. If anything, our industries have both picked up a little bit. So my husband works as a tech recruiter and his company, fortunately the sort of sphere that they're in isn't really being that affected with all the closures. If anything, hiring's kind of picking up a bit. So he's been really busy. And then I work in a job that's publishing-adjacent. So that has also felt a little bit like running a million miles an hour in place because so many--you know this from working in libraries--so many tours have been canceled and publication dates are being moved around and so forth.

CHARIS        Yeah, publishing is in an uproar.

SHARON        [sighs] It is. Yeah. It's one of those weird things where publishing as an industry tends to be pretty conservative, pretty slow moving. One of my coworkers... the one who says time is a flat circle, her phrase is also, you know, there is no breaking news in publishing. Usually there are no fires. But everything's been on fire for the last month.

CHARIS        Oh goodness. I don't even know any of your coworkers, but I have a favorite of your coworkers. Is that weird?

SHARON        [laughs and then whispers] She's secretly my favorite too, but don't tell anyone.

CHARIS        It's kind of like, I have a favorite sibling and it's the one who listens to the podcast regularly.

SHARON        Heeeeeee, Charis' sibling!

CHARIS        Don't tell the other siblings!

You know, one of the things that's kind of come out of this is it's reminding people that we really do need the arts, because they're part of what makes us human and it makes us not crazy.

SHARON Yeah. I, um, kind of had this strange experience of reading STATION ELEVEN right before things got really, really intense. You know, there are two readers in the world, right? There are two types of people in the world and I'm apparently the one that's like, Let's read more pandemic books!

[both laugh]

CHARIS Sharon, [urgently] don't read DOOMSDAY BOOK!

SHARON Oh I will not make that mistake again! I read DOOMSDAY BOOK many years ago, you know, when the world was happy and cheerful and was still horribly depressed afterward. Yeah. So public service announcement, don't read DOOMSDAY BOOK, probably don't read STATION ELEVEN right now, but you know, the phrase that the traveling actor troupe uses in that post-apocalyptic landscape is from *Star Trek*. That survival itself is insufficient. You need art, you need creativity, you need music, and drama, and all these different things like you were saying to remind us of, I think not just better times, but of what the human spirit can accomplish.

CHARIS Other than Dorothy Sayers, one of my other favorite writers is Terry Pratchett. And I am literally always rereading the Discworld novels because I listened to the audio books when I go to sleep and in HOGFATHER, which is kind of his Christmas adjacent book, there's a part where a character, who's the personification of Death--like it's Death the person as opposed to death the process--is talking about how humans need things like hope and truth. And they, they need them to be the place where the fallen angel meets the rising ape, which [SHARON oohs admiringly in the background: That's lovely] I know, it's so good. And I think about that a lot. I think about that a lot.

SHARON Probably especially now.

CHARIS Yes.

SHARON Well, we'll link up all those reading recommendations and reading anti-recommendations in the shownotes.

CHARIS I like, I feel bad being all don't read Connie Willis, because, you should read Connie Willis, but just maybe right now read TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG and not DOOMSDAY BOOK, which... it's a tremendous book, but it is....

SHARON Yeah. The premise is it's about time traveling historians. One of whom goes back to the time of the Black Death and gets trapped there and is like, Oh, all of our estimates about

how many people died in the Black Death were horribly wrong because it turns out entire villages died and then were just wiped off the historical record. Right? Rocks fall. *Everybody* dies. It's really terrible.

CHARIS        It's a very... it's, it's a powerful book, but it's *very* rough. And yes, my official recommendation is TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG, which is Dorothy Sayers adjacent.

SHARON        I add my recommendation to yours. [chuckling] *Speaking* of Sayers adjacent!

CHARIS        Yes! So I have not heard the episode that our listeners are about to hear, I'm going to be hearing it with them for the first time, because I had computer troubles and wasn't able to join you. So why don't you tell me and our listeners about our guest and the subject for this special episode?

SHARON        Yes. So the subject for this special episode is glands. As we have mentioned several times, we know nothing about the history of neuroscience, particularly how it would have been perceived in the popular imagination and how Sayers was interacting with different concepts of morality and biochemistry and so forth, particularly in WHOSE BODY? and in UNNATURAL DEATH. So in this episode I spoke with our listener Gavrielle Farmer--listener and friend of the pod now--'cause she knows way more about all of this stuff, i.e. anything, than we did. And we had a really wonderful conversation where she told me lots about how psychology as a discipline was intersecting with more of the bodily sciences at the time. And how people were starting to understand more about the nervous system and brain chemistry and how all of those things affect behavior.

We talk about how these concepts come up in the book and also talked a lot about shell shock and PTSD and how the evolving understanding of what's shell shock was really both came from scientific discovery, but also kind of what was convenient for the military to admit or not admit, um, kind of like the PR aspect of it? So, so yeah, I'm excited for you to listen to it, Charis.

CHARIS        I'm so excited to hear it! I was very sad to miss recording because I am so interested in learning more about this topic. Like I think as I said, in one of our previous episodes where the subject was coming up, I was just like, I want to know more, but I don't even know enough to know what to search for.

SHARON        Yeah. It's just really nice to talk with someone who has such a command of the subject matter that even when you're feeling like I don't know what questions to ask, because I don't know enough about my own ignorance to even know how to address it, they can lead you through all of that.

CHARIS        I am looking forward to it and thank you so much to Gavrielle for reaching out to us via email and agreeing to be on the podcast. And we hope that all of you will enjoy it. I know that I am about to--

[snippet of THEME music for transition]

SHARON So today we have Gavrielle Farmer with us to talk about glands and we're so pleased. Gavrielle, thank you so much for speaking with us. Would you tell our listeners a little bit about yourself, your background, and how you came to be so knowledgeable about neuroscience?

GAVRIELLE Yes. Thank you so much for having me on your wonderful show. So I have a bachelor degree in neuroscience. I attended George Mason University and hold the degree from them and also I also had become familiar with the Wimsey series probably in high school. I think I started with STRONG POISON and then read the books completely out of order. But I, through being interested in the other sorts of detective mysteries of that time period, have become very familiar with not only neuroscience as it is taught in the current sense, but also how it is written about in the contemporary literature to Sayers and particularly in mystery and detective fiction. So when you said something in THE BELLONA CLUB about wanting to talk about Dr. Penberthy and Dr. Freke, I got very excited!

SHARON Well, we're so glad that you reached out to us! You sent Charis and myself a very detailed email, all about the contemporary attitudes about that interaction between brain chemistry and behavior. So I'd love for you to take our listeners through some of that. Maybe what was going on in the early 20th century with the science at large and... would the ideas that Freke and Penberthy were bringing forward, would those have been mainstream or kind of consider it a little bit more niche?

GAVRIELLE Yeah. So I think that WHOSE BODY? was actually one of the... it may have actually been the last of the Wimsey books I tracked down to read, and it was probably one of the most recent ones. And so I was really fascinated when I got to it, because this book was published in 1923, to see a lot of things in it that I thought were telling of Sayers paying a lot of attention to what was known about how the brain works at this time. Because in the '20s, of course, psychology had kind of become a respectable individual science in the later part of the Victorian era, particularly the 1880s, 1890s. We see it kind of differentiating into not just a few people talking about it in a philosophical sense, but really becoming an individual science.

SHARON Like its own discipline?

GAVRIELLE Yes. And that's where we start to see the first psychological professional organizations being established and some things like that. So during those decades, and the Edwardian period leading up to the first world war, we get these... what I think of as kind of the most basic discoveries about the structure of the brain and the nervous system. And we get the early identifications of some of the mental disorders and mental illnesses that we'd be familiar with. In kind of an amusing order, some of the ones that were not discovered but named early on are ones that we think of as very common and other ones were extremely rare, but in terms of how they became part of the common consciousness, that kind of public interest, of course it

comes a little bit later. And particularly I think it's worthwhile to know that in 1906, a man named Santiago Ramón y Cajal won the Nobel Prize for having discovered that the nervous system throughout the body is made of separate cells and not one continuous cord, like the veins are a continuous vessel, but so just that very basic idea of it being separate cells would have kind of been in the news less than 20 years before WHOSE BOYD? was published.

And in the decades in between, we get the term mental illness named for the first time. The idea that the brain has lobes that have different functions so that you have different kinds of information being processed in different parts of the brain was brand new. So in particular, there's a section in WHOSE BODY? where Peter is looking in WHO'S WHO at Dr. Freke's publications. And I was looking at this last night and kind of very charmed by this, because he has quite a lot of publications ranging from 1892 to 1920 that are just fictionalized titles that Sayers came up with. So it starts with the very first one: "Some Notes on the Pathological Aspects of Genius," which is so funny in context with both himself and Peter.

SHARON Yeah. Would people have understood that term pathological in the same way that we do now?

GAVRIELLE Yes, because at that point it was already being used in that sense of when we say pathological, we mean we are treating it as a medical concern, we're treating it as something that we can identify as possibly a problem, something we can treat.

And then [Freke's cv] goes on through some other, very, very realistic kinds of issues that he was looking at: infant paralysis, disturbances of the nervous system, diseases. Again and again, I see the words insanity and lunacy, particularly criminal lunacy. There's one that has to do with the application of psychotherapy to the treatment of shell shock in 1917.

SHARON Very relevant.

GAVRIELLE Yeah. And then there's one where he's doing "An Answer to Professor Freud." So we get the sense that he is a confident and prominent enough medical gentleman that he feels like he can essentially give a professional call out to the most famous psychologist.

SHARON Yeah. Even the, let's see the 1910 publication: "The Modern Developments in Psychotherapy," colon, "A Criticism." [both laugh] I always chuckle at that because I'm like, ahhh academia! "Colon, a criticism" is a subfield of itself.

GAVRIELLE You know that you've stumbled on some academic beef when you find a series of articles that start out "A Response."

SHARON [laughing] Yeah, exactly.

GAVRIELLE And then the most recent publication in Dr. Freke's line up here is "Structural Modifications Accompanying the More Important Neuroses." And that's a really exciting one to see for me because that puts him on the cutting edge. Sayers has positioned him as somebody who is not only following the up-to-the-minute interests within the field, but pushing them. And that's something that he and Peter talk about repeatedly in this book, the idea of your experiences changing your physical reality in your brain. And he talks about that when he is talking to Peter about stress. And he says something about, "You know quite well that the strain you put on your nerves during the War has left its mark on you. Sensations received by your nerve endings sent messages to your brain and produced to minute physical changes there. Changes we are only beginning to be able to detect, even with our most delicate instruments. These changes in their turn send up sensations, or I should say more accurately that sensations are the names we give to these changes of tissue. When we perceive them, we call them horror, fear, sense of responsibility, and so on."

And that! Is very accurate! It's still pretty much how I would explain that to somebody who was talking to me about trauma on a physical level, this idea of what we call neuroplasticity. These ways in which your brain is being molded by what you have lived through and what you think about frequently. And so you get your cells more specialized to have thoughts easily that are the things that you pursue thinking about frequently. That's related to this idea of if you don't use it, you lose it. And so your brain will further develop the cells that have to do with what you use, and it will prune the ones you don't.

And the fact that as early as 1923, this was something that was coming up in, you know, popular genre fiction really surprised me because I didn't realize that it was in the popular consciousness that early. I would have guessed it was a little later. And that may just be that I have not read enough of the more serious literary kind of fiction of the time period. And maybe other authors were doing this kind of thing, but it reinforced to me that Sayers was really running with an intellectual professional crowd and had sought out really carefully the information to try to make Dr. Freke sound reasonable and realistic and correct and authoritative. And of course Dr. Penberthy in *THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB* is talking about glands. So he's more interested in kind of the chemical hormonal aspect of this, and I'm a little bit less familiar with how the glands were perceived at this time, because I'm a little bit more familiar just in my own studies with how those chemicals interact with thoughts and behaviors than with how the glands themselves work.

But again, I think that Dr. Penberthy sounded like he was in tune with Sayers trying to be careful and correct and trendy, because I do think that the '20s and the early '30s was a time when her readers were very aware of and interested in psychology. And I think that y'all talked about Dr. Freud, of course, in previous episodes and how prominent he was and some of his contemporaries like Carl Jung. And it's interesting to me that she didn't lean completely into the psychoanalysis side of it so much as the neuroscience element, the physiological component. And particularly in regards to... I'm thinking about Christie's detective. Hercule Poirot was a contemporary of Lord Peter's, and he liked to talk about "the little gray cells" and kind of



applying psychology to the idea of human nature and his detection, but Sayers took this different tactic of not having Peter psychoanalyze people as much as having these two villains talking about how the psychology goes with physical changes.

SHARON Yeah. It's very fascinating to both Charis and myself that on the one hand she has... she's very meticulous, as you say, about making sure that the science is pretty airtight. We know from her letters that she had correspondence with medical men and with researchers and so forth to make sure that she got those details correct. And that she's dealing with very, very cutting edge concepts, but making the mouthpieces of those cutting edge concepts both the villainous characters, the murderers in both cases. And I wonder if that has to do with kind of Sayers the budding theologian feeling potentially a little uncomfortable with having... I don't know if in the public imagination people were starting to be like, Oh, there's no such thing as morality, you know what I mean? Like the part where Freke says the knowledge of good and evil is a phenomenon of the mind and it can be removed or excised. Is that the point at which either people around Sayers, the common public would have been like, Oh, that's too far, or is Sayers being a little bit more conservative than what people around her would have thought?

GAVRIELLE No, I actually think she is very much reflecting these conversations that people would have been having about it. And some of the anxieties that were present even within the field, after we had been emailing each other, I looked up some more things about psychology and religion during this time period as they were interacting with each other, because that was something I knew less about. And one of the things I thought that was really interesting was this article I found also published in 1923 in *The Journal of Religion*, by a man named George Malcolm Stratton. And it was called "Where Has Psychology Left Religion?" So some of the things that this talked about was whether psychology permits the affirmation of mind, whether Freudian analysis is a safe guide, is mental activity mechanistic. I'll explain some of these in a second. And mostly this gentleman was very positive as, Oh, we can use psychology as a tool to reinforce and amplify our work as people in the church and as people of faith.

And some of these anxieties that he was addressing--the one about whether mental activity is mechanistic has to do with now that we have identified how the brain interacts with itself, and our thoughts on a chemical level, on an electrical level, does that mean the brain is a machine? If the brain is a machine, where does that leave our understanding of the soul?

And I'm, I might be overstating this a little bit, but it seems to me that, you know, in kind of the early modern period, and before we get people talking about...of course the word *mind* was a word, but there's the body and there's the soul. And then as psychology had become more of a present concept, we get the body and the mind and the soul as a group of three that overlap. And so there was this conflict between the brain, as a physical object, the mind being the contents of our thoughts and the soul. And the religious kind of conflict of, you know, how much information would disprove in people's minds, the idea that the soul even exists. And this gentleman, Mr. Stratton, or Malcolm Stratton, was very much seeming to come down on the favor of just because we know how it works does not mean that it discounts the idea of a soul,

because our thoughts happen in tandem with the physical changes and other kinds of things. There were two elements that he seemed particularly wary of with psychological research. One is the Freudian obsession with sex--

SHARON I can't imagine why a churchman would be uncomfortable with that--

GAVRIELLE He says something kind of funny about like, Oh, but the subconscious is not something we're really brought to think about, is it, because it's got so much to do with sex. And I can't find the exact bit, but he kind of doesn't answer that. But the other part that I thought was actually really funny was that he was very suspicious of people who were doing animal behavior studies. And I had to think a little bit about why that was. I don't know whether this is or was universally a doctrine across all denominations, but I do know that within some Christian schools of thought, there is this idea that animals do not have souls. And so from Stratton's perspective, if they do not have souls, they don't really have thoughts in the same way that we kind of narrate our lives to ourselves and have emotional reactions in the same way. They're, you know, they're just kind of having physical things going on. And so he thought that this interest in animal behavior was a little worrying because he was concerned that if we got too interested in how animals behaved and how to extrapolate that onto humans, we would then kind of reverse engineer that into saying, well, humans think like animals, therefore they don't have the kind of individual thought and morality and spirituality that we have historically assigned to the human domain.

SHARON Like the anti-Descartes. The "I think, therefore I am not"?

GAVRIELLE I literally have the page open and he's talking about Descartes!

SHARON [laughing] Well, me and Mr. Stratton separated by a century and yet on the same page!

GAVRIELLE And he's talking about having to forego, "in the study of rats and cats, the advantages of self observation and verbal self report. They would have the entire study of human conscious life make a like renunciation. It is an amusing and in the end, harmless, extravagance." And I as a modern person who studied animal behavior in the course of my degree, I thought this was a little harsh on animal behaviorists. There's a lot that we can say about animals, because they have the same kind of genes and structures that we do, they are going to respond to a lot of things in the same way that we do. And I think that animal behaviorists are very careful to not anthropomorphize and to make sure that they have good what's called face validity, which is testing for what you actually think you're testing for. So making sure that they can't just say, "Oh, this is clearly a happy animal."

SHARON [laughs] Which I do to dogs all the time.

GAVRIELLE Right. But if you were doing a study for an antidepressant, you need to make sure that you have found patterns in behavior and motions that are consistent with how it will help humans. So for example, there's a way that we sometimes test antidepressants where we give it to mice, and then we have the mice swim. And if the mice are very actively trying to stay afloat, the antidepressant is more effective and a mouse that is exhibiting depression symptoms will kind of flop onto its back and kind of weakly flail its little paws around. And you know, when I was first told that we did that, I was kind of like, well, okay, so we're saying a mouse that doesn't feel like swimming is depressed? And then it had to be kind of like, no, no, no, we have tested all these drugs. And we know now the ones that don't work in humans, the mice do this behavior.

SHARON Gotcha. Right. So we're not saying the mice are depressed. We're just saying this drug will not work on *human* depression.

GAVRIELLE Right. But of course I also know from having studied how some of these [ideas] were developed, I don't know that Mr. Stratton's contemporaries were going to those kinds of levels of care or caution. In fact, I know they weren't. So he was very understandably concerned about probably some of the studies he had heard about, where they were kind of anthropomorphizing the animals or going, Oh, this clearly indicates something that it clearly doesn't. But that particular anxiety about comparing animals to humans, fascination with sex and criminal behavior, are all things that come up again and again in the contemporary criticisms of psychology that I found. And I'm not very familiar with Sayers' theological writings. So I don't know if those things come up.

SHARON I mean, I think she was someone who certainly was always very interested in the material realities that people live in. She wasn't a theologian who was like, Oh, let's just all play our harps and think spiritual thoughts and, you know, not think about bodily realities. And I'm not a scholar of Sayers' theological writings either, but I imagine where her personal beliefs would have come down where it comes to Freke... I don't think the problem is that he's kind of on the cutting edge of medicine or engaging in science. I don't think Sayers had an anti-science bent at all. I think probably where she would have backed off from the contemporary debates was similarly to where Mr. Stratton was concerned. Of... will this excuse people from thinking about moral conscience, right? Because I think in that triad that you were describing the mind, the brain, the soul, Sayers and other theologians would heavily argue that morality comes from the soul or that a kind of moral conscience or ability to empathize with fellow creatures or so forth comes from the soul.

So I think any science that would have edged up to even hint at, you know, there is no soul, there's just a mind, there's just a body, or there's just a brain and a body, would have been pretty concerning to her. But I think it's one of the things that makes these two villains, and I think Freke in particular, so fascinating. That he's not a caricature. He's very accomplished. He's very intelligent. And I wonder if Sayers was making any kind of comment there, you know, especially post her own Oxford days [that] all the intelligence in the world, if it's not coupled with

a kind of moral responsibility, is not only not worthwhile, but is potentially dangerous to people. Which seems like an awkward segue way to eugenics.

GAVRIELLE Yeah. So I mean, as we have talked about in emailing and as y'all have talked about in past episodes, this idea of criminal lunacy particularly is one that pops up on Dr. Freke's CV here. And he talks about it in his suicide note, too, about the flaws that he fixed that he consistently sees in criminals, which he seems to think that *he* is completely exempt from it.

SHARON [Laughs] Yeah, like he's not a criminal!

GAVRIELLE "An overweening vanity" and I... [laughs] yeah, you do! And so he and a lot of other people who were interested in all medical fields at this time were very interested in this idea in early criminology. And if they could find any physical or environmental patterns to who was criminal and how they got that way. And it's, you know, it's still something that comes up in the rest of the 20th and the 21st centuries. But particularly during this time, as we know, eugenics was something that was very much on people's minds. It was kind of the height of eugenics in Europe and the United States and this idea of excising parts of people's personalities that he talks about. And that Dr. Penberthy talks about in [UNPLEASANTNESS]. I think he's talking to a man of religion and they're talking about, well, if you can give someone an injection and remove sin, and those [ideas] of course are related to eugenics because it's making a decision to medicalize how people act and how people think. And I think it's kind of hard for me to say how much Sayers was conscious of condemning it as eugenics. There's a spoilery bit we talked about... I don't know if now is a good moment for it, or if you want to wait?

SHARON Let's talk about it now. I'll drop a note in our show notes about it, for our listeners who really, really do not want to know anything about future books, where to pause and unpause.

GAVRIELLE Yeah. Okay. So it's a bit in GAUDY NIGHT where she talks about eugenics. There's actually, there's a couple of bits, there's a character, and one of you reminded me of her name and I've already forgotten it.

SHARON Oh, it's Miss Schuster Slatt. She's the really kind of vulgar American woman. And my personal thought is like, of course her initials are SS.

GAVRIELLE Yeah. And I had not made that connection until we were emailing, but so Miss SS is an American eugenesisist who was visiting Oxford and was talking about—I don't own a copy of GAUDY NIGHT, so I had trouble figuring out what the exact quote was. I know my library had it, so I never had to buy it.

SHARON [aghast] We'll send you one as a thank you for coming on! Everyone should own a copy [of GAUDY NIGHT].

GAVRIELLE So, but she says something about how Peter is like her ideal man, because she thinks that the English aristocracy produced (in her mind) superior children. And it's, you know, very, very basic eugenics icky stuff. And she's kind of this darkly comic nuisance character. And it's clear that Sayers doesn't like her and doesn't want us to like her, but there's also a part where Harriet is talking to, I think, Miss de Vine. And I think Miss de Vine says something about... they're talking about Miss SS and Miss de Vine says something like, Oh yeah, they're trying something like that in Germany. And there's something just so flippant about it. And it's from a character we *do* generally like, or I do generally like, and it's hard for me to know because of that how much Sayers was kind of consciously being like, Oh yeah, this is something that sucks that I'm taking a stand against and how much it was just something that was in her kind of social sphere that she thought was annoying.

SHARON Right. Right. Well, and there's that very telling exchange between Harriet and Padgett, the gatekeeper. Mr. Padgett who keeps the gatehouse into Shrewsbury College. For most of the book, he's a very genial, super cordial, you know, a little bit old fashioned, but he thinks of the dons as the women that he's protecting. And he's always very kind. And for the most part, you're just like, Oh, what a kind old man. And then at one point he lets drop... it's like a throwaway line. And I can't remember if he says it to Peter or Harriet. It might be to Peter because he's... Padgett is sort of saying how in his day young women stayed at home and were good wives and mothers and didn't go to Oxford. And then he just out of *nowhere* says "What this country needs is a Hitler."

GAVRIELLE Oh my God. I forgot about that!

SHARON Yeah. I mean, it's very... like every time I'm like, AHHHHH PADGETT! You know? Like, we were rooting for you!

GAVRIELLE We were all rooting for you! Oh no! It's awful. I did not remember it, but yeah! It's one of those things that you've covered on the show before, where some of Sayers kind of class consciousness... it's hard to know which characters are her mouthpieces and which characters are simply reflecting something that she was aware of in the world.

SHARON Exactly. I think what books like GAUDY NIGHT and what these other works of popular culture, these other detective fiction works in the time, are showing is that these were very common conversations, at least, that people were having, right? Whether we can determine where Sayers the author or where Sayers the person came down on any of it is, I think, maybe a less interesting question than just like what is getting reflected in the literature. And I think certainly, as you know, by the time GAUDY NIGHT is published, everyone knows we're barreling towards World War II. And so I think people have written about the fact that this series was sort of begun, continued, and then completed in the interwar period. And Sayers herself said that when World War II started, she just kind of couldn't bring herself to keep writing light detective stories.

GAVRIELLE [chuckles] Which is fair

SHARON [laughs] Yes, which is very fair! Also interesting because I just wouldn't call her stories that light, especially when you put them up against the Christies and the Ngaio Marshes and things. And particularly the interest in shell shock and the traumas of the war. And I was wondering if we could maybe get back to... or tie everything together via that intersection of war trauma and neurochemistry and where the world is going at this period. How did people's understanding of shell shock change over this time?

GAVRIELLE Yeah. And particularly, like I said, I read the Wimsey books very out of order, and I think it's only been since I've been listening to the podcasts that I've kind of realized how some of these books flow into each other. And that has really struck me in terms of what you're saying, that this series is almost haunted by that first world war and every mystery that we've covered so far, you've been talking about the veterans and the people who were left behind, the extraneous women and all these things. And it's interesting also, because the big reason that in the 1920s psychology and psychoanalysis became so much part of the popular discussion compared to the preceding decades was because of shell shock. And when I was researching the history of shell shock, one thing that really surprised me is that, you know, obviously I think there's a temptation now to use shell shock as an old term for PTSD.

And I think I'm just gonna clarify that PTSD cases felt under shell shock, but shell shock encompassed other traumas as well in terms of how they were using it at the time. And when we look at how PTSD and how trauma has been treated over time, there's a real temptation, even within the scholarly literature almost to say that PTSD didn't exist before World War II, which--

SHARON [chuckles] Is obviously not true.

GAVRIELLE It's not true. As long as bad things have happened to people, people have been getting PTSD. And the psychological research on it prior to the first world war was mostly apparently in the context of industrial accidents. The symptoms were called railway brain for a while because people who had been in railway crashes sometimes had PTSD and other kind of traumatic symptoms.

But when World War I happened, of course, many, many other people have talked about how this horror was different from other wars that came before in terms of the technology. But for whatever reason, early on in the war, they had a quantity of cases of PTSD that they didn't know what to do with, and they were calling it shell shock at this time. And that name came from the idea that these were people who had had a shell explode near them in a battlefield and startled them so much that they couldn't cope afterwards. And the very first few people who got it, at least in the British army, were sent home. And they mostly didn't do very well from being sent home, partly because people at home didn't know what to do for them. And because they had had the sudden change in environment and they were separated from their comrades. And so

they were suddenly cut off of social support. And so they started keeping them in military hospitals as much as possible, pretty quickly. And that was good for the patients in terms of having this kind of continuity of surroundings, but it was also in the military's best interests because shell shock was very inconvenient, right?

SHARON [dryly] We can't have a glorious war if people are coming back very, very traumatized, right.

GAVRIELLE Then because they had sent those first few people home, people at home were aware from very early on that people were getting fairly severely damaged on an emotional and psychological level. And it made people less likely to want to sign up. It made the war less popular among families and media outlets at the time. And so it's kind of hard to tell how much of the changes in treatment were really for the benefit of those suffering, as opposed to the military, how it being a functioning unit--

SHARON Right. Probably a little from column A and a little from column B.

GAVRIELLE Which is understandable, but not doesn't make me enormously sympathetic to some of these people making decisions. And in line with that, because they realized that shell shock was so inconvenient to their image, they started giving the diagnosis to fewer and fewer people as the war went on, whether or not they actually met the symptoms that they had laid out, they kept tightening it and tightening it.

SHARON Okay. I never knew that.

GAVRIELLE Which meant that by the time of the Wimsey books and everybody was home, there were, you know, there were soldiers with shell shock that had been given that diagnosis. There were soldiers who were given the diagnosis after the war, and there were soldiers who kind of self-diagnosed with shell shock. And so the number of people who were being affected by these war traumas ended up being much larger than originally believed by the public, once everybody was home and they could kind of see how badly it affected people. Everybody knew people who had shell shock or something close to it, which meant that everybody was interested in these kinds of charitable efforts, these scientific efforts to help them. And that makes sense with Dr., Penberthy having this kind of charity fundraising party, but it was about, you know, let me tell you about this wonderful glands clinic. I'm going to open it. And they're going to cure all of these people that you're worried about. And so give me money to do this thing. It was on everybody's minds. And so of course she gave Peter these symptoms that she saw in the people around her. And for what it's worth, I'm not qualified to diagnose a person real or fictional with PTSD, but I believe that he meets the checklist.

He meets all the things that are required to have PTSD, and rather than some other traumatic set of symptoms and like most people in real life, it kind of goes back and forth between

severity. It's possible that at times he dips out of technically qualifying for PTSD, and then he swings back. But, you know the flashback, avoidance, being on edge—arousal and reactivity are the technical terms, which, I mean, Peter's brain is never quiet and it's implied that it wasn't ever really quiet before the war either, but he's kind of always on. And so some of those personality features, whether they came for the shell shock or not are consistent with it. Some depression, guiltiness, transient interests in transient pleasures make sense. And so there's of course this ongoing theme of how he deals with that, that you've been discussing in the various episodes, and I'm not going to rehash how he and Bunter deal with it.

But it's interesting that there is this theme of some characters having very different attitudes to his trauma than others. I think we talked in email about how Helen—that's his sister in law's name, right?

SHARON Yes.

GAVRIELLE Yes. So Helen has this attitude that was somewhat common that it was borderline malingering. That he was, you know, not tough enough to get over it. This very old guard attitude that's consistent with the idea of war being glorious and manly. And also with this idea that men of his class were expected to incur a certain amount of deprivation and physical stress, I'll say, in order to become a man. It was very common for boys of his class to be sent to schools where they endured these horrible abuses, like obviously awful physical punishment.

SHARON Just to learn how to have a stiff upper lip. Right.

GAVRIELLE It kind of ties into this, the stereotype we'll see in fiction of, you know, the British gentleman, who's very sexually repressed and he doesn't talk about his emotions and we just get things done. And of course Peter is none of those things.

SHARON Right? Well, and parts of his family are like, Oh yes. That's because there's, you know, the French strain from our mother's side. Peter's just so French!

GAVRIELLE He's so continental, he's off having affairs with opera singers. And he's talking about his emotions in public. We don't know what to do with him. And it's very charming to me that Sayers in her decision to be like, Oh, everybody likes the aristocracy, went very much with somebody who was not in keeping with these conventional values of personality. There's...this is the other spoiler. We talked about the very final scene of the novels it has to do with Harriet learning how Peter likes to be interacted with when he's having an episode. And this, this kind of, I think it says something about that. She has to have this understanding that if she goes to him when she hears him crying, he will shut off forever. He's not going to open up to her in the future. And so she has to kind of endure it until he is ready to come to her, which is wonderful, both in terms of this theme that y'all have been talking about with what makes a good relationship, but also with this theme of Sayers indicating that the real best treatment, if you can even call it that, for somebody who is traumatized is compassion. Is meeting them where they



are. And that is, I don't want to say it was rare for the time, but certainly it wasn't, you know, it wasn't the only attitude that was present, as can be seen by Helen and some of the old guard soldiers. Or that guy you were talking about in THE BELLONA CLUB, who's like, ha, he went to war and he had a good time.

It's also very worth remembering that it was because of this interest in PTSD and shell shock that was driving a lot of this research that she then incorporated having to do with the physical elements of the body and the mind. And there was a 1920s experiment by James Watson and Rosalie Rayner called the Little Albert Experiments. And that had to do with...it's this sort of thing we would never ever do today because they were traumatizing a child on purpose. And I mean, I'm sure the kid ended up being more or less okay, but what they did was they would give the small boy, I think it was a stuffed rabbit toy. And then out of his line of sight, one of them would bang two pieces of metal together. I think it was a lead pipe and a hammer or something like that.

And so he grew to associate this toy with this loud noise that was upsetting to him. And over time, not only did he start crying when he saw the toy, he would start crying when he saw other white fuzzy things like a white cat, or I think a washcloth. So some other similar objects, you know. That's not fun to think about, [that] the child probably took a while to be comfortable around those things. But what was helpful about that experiment in terms of shell shock specifically, was that it taught people that you can have horrible reactions to innocuous objects because you have learned to associate them because it was present when this upsetting thing happened. And so I think that when it reached professionals, it was probably very helpful in figuring out how to deal with some of the cases where people were having triggers that they didn't even know why they had, or that they had. And yeah, they kind of continued on this, these multiple kinds of approaches to treating the shell shocked soldiers of, you know, some people who were advocating this very stiff, kind of get over it kind of treatment and others were being very gentle.

And of course your access to treatment at all was very dependent on what sort of money you had, how much you needed to be working. All these things. And the social perception of shell shock was one of great horror and great empathy. And so by the time the second World War rolled around, they kind of stopped using the term within the military. And they start kind of shifting to more euphemistic terms. Particularly they started talking about soldiers as having exhaustion in the US or the UK. They would talk about them having exhaustion, not shell shock. They weren't happy, they weren't traumatized. They were exhausted.

SHARON     Because that sounds like, you know, Oh, just take a rest here and we can ship you right back to the front. Right.

GAVRIELLE   Yep. Yep. And so there's this ongoing kind of effort to downplay it and how many cases were being seen. And it kind of continued that way until the Vietnam War. And I think it's not really clear to me what particularly changed aside from, you know, there was this enormous

student activism, particularly against the Vietnam War and new research and changes in media. So because of trying to create this environment of understanding the trauma that was being seen in the Vietnam War, the term PTSD was finally coined in the [19]80s.

SHARON     Wow. I didn't realize it was that late, but yeah, it makes sense that as narratives about war changed through this century, that some of this would be more emphasized and then deemphasized, and then emphasized again.

GAVRIELLE   Yeah. And once the term PTSD was changed and I might be overstating this because military history is definitely not my wheelhouse, but it seems to me that those two wars of World War I and the Vietnam War represent the turning points in the Western culture of changing this narrative from soldiers being framed in glory to it is this sacrifice to serve, because they had to come up with some way to reframe what people do in joining the military for...honestly, for PR, but also to try to give this impression of, okay, we can't outrun the fact that more trauma is a very real problem that we are still struggling to figure out how to treat, but we need to give the impression that we are trying to treat it. We are making it a responsibility to treat it. And I don't have the year up, but I know that one of the kind of cultural keystones close to Sayers' time was the Wilfred Owen poem of "Dulce et decorum est."

And, and that of course is something that I thought about a lot when I was reading THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB and how she had incorporated this new feeling of war as a horrible thing. And I know that when you were doing those episodes on that book, there's a part where Peter says something about how war is horrible for men with imaginative minds. And that fascinated me because it's not a 100% thing. It's something that's been proposed, but we don't really have it definitively pinned down. But when I was doing my studies, a couple different professors brought up the fact that we think one of the risk factors for developing PTSD is having a really vivid imagination. And in particular, I know one of my professors talked about that. She thinks if you have more trouble deciding "I don't want to think about this right now. I'm going to push this thought away. And I'm going to think about this later or not at all." If you have more trouble doing that, you're more like probably more likely to develop PTSD, which should make sense if you're having--

SHARON     Intrusive thoughts, yeah?

GAVRIELLE   Mmhmm. Intrusive thoughts, persistent thoughts. That makes sense. But I don't want anybody to take that as a 100% thing. We're still trying to figure it out. I have gone completely off my outline now! So-- [both laugh]

SHARON     Was there anything else that you wanted to cover or? I feel like ending it on a note of having compassion for people with trauma, whether that's from the military or otherwise is a good note. We can all have more compassion on each other.

GAVRIELLE Yeah. And I think it's also worth thinking about that Harriet has some trauma, too, from her experiences, both with Phillip Boyes as an awful partner and being accused of his murder. So as, as you go through STRONG POISON and onwards and she shows up, although I don't think she qualifies for PTSD, I think we will see some parallels between how she and Peter think about things and approach things because they are both coming at it from similar changes to their lives about having to be cautious in ways that they didn't before and having to, um, be gentle with themselves in ways that they didn't have to before.

SHARON Absolutely. Not to give too much away to listeners, but that's definitely going to come up in the future. I think if I had been allowed to just write a dissertation completely on Dorothy Sayers one of the chapters would have been about my deep investment in reading the Harriet books via trauma theory within literature. Because I think that's very much an approach that works with the text, shall we say. So stay tuned, listeners! This is all coming soon.

GAVRIELLE And I personally can't wait.

SHARON Yay! Thank you. Well, Gabrielle, thank you so much for joining me. I have learned so much. I can't wait to share this with our listeners. And dear listeners, if you have any other questions about the history of neuroscience during this period and how it's interacting with detective fiction, other places you see it come up in the text, or questions about shell shock, Gabrielle has very kindly agreed to field those. So if you want to contact your cohosts Charis and Sharon either via our Twitter or our website or email, those channels will be noted in the show notes and we will pass those questions along and relay answers back. So thank you so much. And, more to come!

A quick reminder to our listeners that this podcast will be going on a very brief hiatus. You can expect our next episode, which will be on FIVE RED HERRINGS to drop in four weeks instead of two.

CHARIS In the meantime, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram as at Wimsey pod that's wimsey W I M S E Y. And you can find transcripts and show notes of our episodes on our website at [asmywimseytakesme.com](http://asmywimseytakesme.com).

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CHARIS Join us next time for more talking piffle!

[THEME MUSIC gradually fades out]