

As My Wimsey Takes Me episode 16 transcript

Charis Ellison 00:16

Hello, and welcome to this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me, I'm Charis Ellison--

Sharon Hsu 00:22

And I'm Sharon Hsu. And today we are starting our discussion of HAVE HIS CARCASE--

Charis Ellison 00:27

Hooray!

Sharon Hsu 00:28

Yay! Which we are so relieved to be talking about because it means we're finally past the trains of FIVE RED HERRINGS.

Charis Ellison 00:36

No more fish.

Sharon Hsu 00:37

No more fish. And thank you once again to our friend Angela for joining us for that and making it a much more pleasant experience all around. But yes, today we will be joining Harriet on the seashore. [Sound of waves crashing on the shore with the cry of seagulls in the background] So Charis--

Charis Ellison 01:12

--So Sharon--

Sharon Hsu 01:13

Would you like to give our listeners a brief little sketch on how this novel opens and what the mystery looks like?

Charis Ellison 01:22

Well, talking about the opening of the novel, I want to read the opening paragraph because this is my favorite opening paragraph out of any book that exists. And it really sets the scene for what's happening, which is that Harriet Vane has gone on a walking tour, and it opens like this: "The best remedy for a bruised heart is not, as so many people seem to think, repose upon a manly bosom. Much more efficacious are honest work, physical activity, and the sudden acquisition of wealth. After being acquitted of murdering her lover and indeed, in consequence of that acquittal, Harriet Vane found all three specifics abundantly at her disposal. And although Lord Peter Wimsey with a touching faith in tradition persisted, day in and day out, in presenting the bosom for her approval, she showed no inclination to recline upon it."

Sharon Hsu 02:14

It's so good. Tell me what you love so much. I mean, I love it too. But I'm very curious. Out of, out of ALL the opening paragraphs is, is quite a quite high praise.

Charis Ellison 02:25

It just makes me laugh every time. You can't see me, but I'm grinning so much right now. And I think, like I just, it starts out sounding like it's gonna be a little bit pompous. You know, like, it's got a bunch of long words in it. It's got like that touch of Victoriana about it. And then then it kind of twists around at the end of the paragraph, where it's like "Lord Peter Wimsey with a touching faith in tradition persisted day in and day out in presenting the bosom for her approval." And just I think it's really funny. And I think it kind of sheds a little bit of light on where Harriet is mood-wise, because when we met her in **STRONG POISON**, she was going through this horrific experience, and she was very, like deeply beaten down by all the things that she had gone through. And you probably remember the line in **STRONG POISON**, where she tells Peter that she was meant to be a cheerful person, and that she could piffle rather well herself. But it had gotten knocked out of her. And so this is... we're two years after her trial and her acquittal, and her liveliness has come back, you know, like there's a lot more humor, and there's a lot more added, like, joking around feels like the wrong phrase?

Sharon Hsu 03:49

Well, I think you're hitting on something in in the sense that in **STRONG POISON**, we never see Harriet as herself. Not only because she's, you know, sort of undergoing something that is psychologically and emotionally really rigorous and intense, but also because nothing is from her point of view, right? We see her through Peter and through the testimony of her friends. Whereas the way that this book opens it, there's almost a sense where I always kind of wonder if the first paragraph is sort of in Harriet's voice almost, or like a kind of free indirect discourse of...kind of her take on the world, because as we read more, we find out she's a funny person, she has sort of this dry sense of humor. She can also be rather, you know, sharp and like a tiny bit cynical. And I feel like there's this way in which the first paragraph sort of mimics that kind of tone.

Charis Ellison 04:44

Yeah, it has personality.

Sharon Hsu 04:47

Yes. Yeah. And I think that part where you were saying it has a touch with the Victorian or like, I always actually think of Jane Austen because it starts with this almost like the seemingly, you know, universal statement, right? Like "the best remedy for a bruised heart is not" duh duh dudh and that always just puts in mind the, you know, "It is a truth universally acknowledged..."

Charis Ellison 05:06

You're right

Sharon Hsu 05:07

"...the single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" and then taking the air out of that immediately, with, you know, "nothing is known about the single man's perspective on that but all the matrons of the neighborhood have already decided that, you know, he belongs to this or the other of their daughters" and, and I think there's something really similar happening here to where it's, there's sort of this like this highfalutin kind of universal posited and then sort of immediately like, nope, Harriet.

Harriet, actually, the honest work, physical activity, and oh, yeah, money helps in making things comfortable. Fancy that!

Charis Ellison 05:45

[laughing] Imagine! Money making life easier.

Sharon Hsu 05:48

Mmm. [sarcastically] What?

Charis Ellison 05:50

Who could have foreseen.

Sharon Hsu 05:52

Who could have said! Yeah. And yeah, and we, we kind of go on to see Harriet and Peter sort of sharing the narration or the perspective from which, you know, we as the readers follow the case, but it starts very, very staunchly with Harriet and I think in a certain way in her mind, like we're told a lot about what she thinks about, and how she thinks about it, in these early chapters.

Charis Ellison 06:17

Yeah, yeah. I really think of this as very much Harriet's book like even though it's divided between her and Peter, I still think of it as like primarily Harriet's book. Like this and GAUDY NIGHT and BUSMAN'S HONEYMOON are Harriet books. And Peter is allowed to be there.

Sharon Hsu 06:39

It is really clever, too, I think in the sense of like a craft point of view, right? That like Harriet, the early sort of delay of her getting to the town and notifying somebody about the body comes about because she is on a walking tour. She doesn't own a car. So like, if it had been Peter finding the body, then, you know, everything would have been over in five seconds, because he could just get into his car and zoom off.

Charis Ellison 07:03

Too many resources.

Sharon Hsu 07:04

Too many resources! Yeah.

Charis Ellison 07:06

Too close to being Bruce Wayne.

Sharon Hsu 07:08

Mm hmm.

Charis Ellison 07:09

But to get back to explaining where Harriet is in what she's doing, she's on a walking tour, which this is something that culturally we don't really have in the States. And I don't know if it's very common in Britain anymore, but certainly at the time, people for vacation would go on really long walks. And just walk from town to town, which yeah, you...that's...certainly not where I live in Texas, that's not a thing you can do.

Sharon Hsu 07:42

I was gonna say everything about where you live conspires against this becoming a common activity.

Charis Ellison 07:51

You cannot walk anywhere, really. I mean, like you can if you have legs, and you're able bodied, but it's not enjoyable. But in England...I can't remember when it was passed, but there is a law that there are public pathways that people are required to keep accessible. There's this concept that the citizens of England have a right to go on walks, and cross people's fields, and the walking culture is entirely different.

Sharon Hsu 08:22

I think it's built in a lot more even in kind of the education. I'm thinking about a certain friend of mine who grew up near Birmingham and did...I think it might have been part of Scouts?

Charis Ellison 08:35

For girls, it's Guides.

Sharon Hsu 08:36

Yeah. Oh right. But like as part of her growing up in, in being in Guides, like there's this whole culminating thing where you basically you walk and camp, and it's like a three day hike or something. And, you know, they're really kind of left to fend for themselves using the skills that they've been learning all along. And at the end of it, like, at the time when she was doing it, the Duke of Edinburgh would give you a medal. Clearly still at least part of the culture.

Charis Ellison 09:05

Which is not to say that we don't, that we have nothing like that in the States. I just feel like our version is a lot more intense, you know, like people go and do the Appalachian Trail. Yeah. And that's like, a long walk turned up to 11.

Sharon Hsu 09:17

Yes. I wonder too, if it's that we consider wilderness-y things part of recreation. I want to speak carefully there because I'm like, eugh, obviously, there's like a long history of people claiming to discover things in this country that were previously undiscovered, and it's like, well, no there were people living there

Charis Ellison 09:34

[sarcastically] The people who already lived there don't count.

Sharon Hsu 09:36

Yeah. So acknowledging that even the term like wilderness or the...Teddy Roosevelt being like, "oooh, let's make these national parks and, like, move off the people who are living there" is all bad, bad parts of our history. Yeah. But I think there is more of that sense of like, Oh, yeah, see if you're going to go for a trek or if you can go backpacking, you go into a place that's pretty uninhabited.

Charis Ellison 10:01

Right. As opposed to you just leave your house.

Sharon Hsu 10:04

Right, and walk from town to town, which I...as someone who did her first backpacking trip a couple years ago., Harriet's version sounds much more delightful!

Charis Ellison 10:15

So Harriet has gone on a walking tour. She's walking along the coast. And she's walking between Leston Hoe and Wilvercombe, which I believe they're both fictional places.

Sharon Hsu 10:27

Yes, so there's actually a note in my book before the table of contents that very explicitly calls out that in FIVE RED HERRINGS "the plot was invented to fit a real locality. In this book, the locality has been invented to fit the plot. Both places and people are entirely imaginary." So...

Charis Ellison 10:45

I'm sure that that was a relief. After the however much research that FIVE RED HERRINGS must have taken, I too, would be like, and now I will make it up! It can't be wrong if I make it up!

Sharon Hsu 10:58

I very much, never want to, you know, be like, I think the author was thinking this. As you know, I don't, I don't really subscribe to that kind of literary criticism. But I have to imagine that Sayers was a bit like, well, I did that thing. And now we're back to made up places.

Charis Ellison 11:20

Let's not do that anymore. Yeah. And made up places it is.

Sharon Hsu 11:26

Made up places. But yeah, so she's going between Leston Hoe and Wilvercombe, which is apparently a 16 mile walk along the coast.

Charis Ellison 11:36

I don't even want to imagine doing that. But I understand from my British friends that England is a much more pleasant place to walk. Because it doesn't hit the same temperatures that it does here where I live.

Sharon Hsu 11:49

It's very true. Oh, I actually...complete tangent, but thinking about walking in England made me think of this. So we went to London a few years ago, and I actually ran across the journal that I was keeping during that time, like the other day while I was cleaning out my desk. And thankfully past Sharon, knowing that present Sharon has a terrible memory did a little bit of like a memorandum book and wrote down every day what we saw and what we ate and what we went to. And I guess we were walking so much that I also felt compelled to put in how many miles my phone was tracking that we were walking. And every entry ended with like, you know, "we're footsore but very happy." And at the end, the tally came out to we walked about 80 miles over the course of nine days. Which I'm like, I yeah, I cannot imagine even being able to do that in the States. So I can I can attest to the fact that it is quite pleasant to walk in England.

Charis Ellison 12:54

Yes. Yeah. And also, like, when you're younger. Because, you know, I did my study abroad semester, so many years ago. And I know for a fact that I walked clear across Edinburgh, you know, like, starting from Edinburgh Castle, and wandering around the city, and then going up Arthur's Seat, and down again, and getting extremely lost. So I'm just like, I know that I spent an entire day walking, basically back and forth across the entirety of Edinburgh. And, and in retrospect, I'm like, I don't how did I do that? Because a few years ago, when I went back to Edinburgh with a friend, we barely made it up the Royal Mile. We were like collapsing, we're just like, please someone put us in a wheelbarrow. Take us back to the hotel. We've become old.

Sharon Hsu 13:51

We have. I'm like, I'm pretty sure Harriet is younger than the two of us in this book, so...which is, which is also like a horrifying realization given that, you know, we've been reading about her since we were in our teens. Yeah. Oh, I'm sorry. I keep interrupting. You're trying to tell our listeners about the plot.

Charis Ellison 14:13

What plot!

Sharon Hsu 14:15

Who needs plot?

Charis Ellison 14:16

Let's just reminisce about the times that we've traveled since neither of us have left our houses very much for...

Both 14:23

Months

Charis Ellison 14:24

Except for important things like protesting and going to work as necessary. Yes, but what happens to Harriet is that she's walking along. Oh, here it is. It says that she's 28. Oh, a baby!

Sharon Hsu 14:39

No wonder! 16 miles is a breeze when you're 28!

Charis Ellison 14:44

Well, I don't know. Like, I think I was 28 when I could barely make it up the Royal Mile. But also I was severely anemic and hadn't been diagnosed yet. So...

Sharon Hsu 14:55

That'll do it.

Charis Ellison 14:56

Yeah. So I'm just like severely anemic and trying to take this trip, and I was exhausted the whole time. Yes, so Harriet is 28. And we get more of a description of Harriet than we did in STRONG POISON. You know, we kind of got a really brief character sketch of her. And here we get this description that she was 28 years old, "dark, slight, with a skin naturally a little sallow, but now tanned to an agreeable biscuit color by sun and wind." And it also tells us that she's dressed "sensibly in a short skirt and thin sweater and carried in addition to a change of linen and an extra provision of footwear little else beyond a pocket edition of TRISTRAM SHANDY, a vest pocket camera, a small first aid outfit, and a sandwich lunch." And I'm like other than a change of undergarments, does she not have another outfit? She seems not to.

Sharon Hsu 15:49

Which is interesting.

Charis Ellison 15:51

Yeah. So I'm just like, is that what a walking holiday is?

Sharon Hsu 15:54

Yeah, I do not know.

Charis Ellison 15:58

Yeah. That's just something that I stumbled over this time. I'm just like, Wait a second. Does she only have one outfit?

Sharon Hsu 16:04

You know you're getting older when you're like, how many miles? I mean, I think it does definitely give the sense that, you know, she's not...these tours aren't meant to be like very strenuous physical activity, right? It's supposed to be maybe more of a nice meander.

Charis Ellison 16:21

Yeah, it's very mild. And it's not the Appalachian Trail.

Sharon Hsu 16:25

No.

Charis Ellison 16:27

So she walks for a while and when it gets to be lunchtime, she decides to kind of go down, she finds a place to climb down to the beach. She's been walking along the cliffs kind of above the shore. So she climbs down to kind of a secluded area and has her lunch and she dozes off. And when she wakes up, you know, she decides to walk along the beach, and she comes across the body of a man who is lying on an isolated rock, with his throat quite profoundly cut.

Sharon Hsu 17:03

EXTREMELY cut. Yeah, like I do want to talk about the fact that I think this is one of the more gruesomely described of Sayers' corpses. We've talked a lot previously about how she can often kind of give the impression of horror through dialogue or through some like kind of sidelong details. But this is really one where we're like, along with Harriet, kind of looking directly at a corpse. So it's...

Charis Ellison 17:31

Yeah, the quotation at the beginning of the chapter is "the track was slippery with spouting blood."

Sharon Hsu 17:36

Mm hmm. Which should have clued us in.

Charis Ellison 17:38

Yeah, it's so different from like CLOUDS OF WITNESS. We're just like, yeah, there's blood everywhere, but we don't need to talk about it!

Sharon Hsu 17:44

Mm hmm.

Charis Ellison 17:45

So but do you want to?

Sharon Hsu 17:47

Yeah, I can tell our listeners what's going. I'll describe the scene a little bit. Harriet dozes off. It's really interesting to me that the paragraph ends: "She dozed off," and then the very next paragraph begins, "She was awakened suddenly by what seemed to be a shout or cry almost in her ear." And we'll find out later that a lot about figuring out the culprit and the whodunit and the howdunit of this crime depends on the question of when the victim was actually murdered. So I think it's interesting here that the the dozing off and the waking happens within the space between a paragraph. But like Harriet, we, the reader have no idea kind of how much time has passed, right? Like we're so connected through her point of view that that we are also left unsure. She does glance down at her wristwatch and notices that it's almost two o'clock. And then I love this line: "There's something about virgin sand which arouses all the worst instincts of the the detective story writer. One feels an irresistible impulse to go and make footprints all over it. The excuse which the professional mind makes to itself is that the sand affords a grand opportunity for observation and experiment." So yeah, so Harriet, just goes like bounding along making footprints and talking to herself and then she spots, as you said, this really large rock that it's apparent that when the tide is in, there's probably only a little bit of it that is exposed, but because the

tide is out, Harriet is kind of able to walk all the way up to it. And she at first thinks that somebody...she like sees a figure there and she thinks about "but that's a really uncomfortable place to nap." And then as she gets closer and closer, she says, "Now if I had any luck, he'd be a corpse and I should report him and get my name in the papers. That'd be something like publicity. 'Well known woman detective writer finds mystery corpse, mystery corpse on lonely shore,' but these things never happened to authors." And of course, you know, she walks up and what has happened to her but she finds a corpse! And it says "Harriet's luck was in. It was a corpse, not the sort of corpse there could be any doubt about either. Mr. Samuel Ware of Lion's Inn whose throat they cut 'from ear to ear' could not have been more intuitively a course. Indeed, if the head did not come off in Harriet's hands, it was only because the spine was intact, for the larynx and all the great vessels of the neck had been severed 'to the hawse bone,' and a frightful stream, bright red and glistening, was running over the surface of the rock and dripping into a little hollow below." And Harriet puts her head down or...no, she...not. Wait. AGGHH, no, she does NOT put HER head down, she puts THE head down and "feels suddenly sick," which is always a bit how I feel as well, after reading that because it is yeah, it's it's really, really gruesome.

Charis Ellison 20:37

Mm hmm.

Sharon Hsu 20:38

So never let it be said that Sayers could not write a very disturbing corpse discovery if she wanted to. But yeah, but then Harriet, there's I mean, there's also like a lot of meta narrative here, right? where she's, there's a lot of reference to her profession as a detective writer, and she thinks to herself, "what would Lord Peter Wimsey do in such a case? Or, of course, Robert Templeton," who is the the hero of Harriet's [books]...like Harriet's fictional hero and detective in her novels, so she very much banishes Lord Peter from her mind.

Charis Ellison 21:13

But he did arrive first.

Sharon Hsu 21:15

He did arrive first. And she also thinks as she's examining the body that like, you know, how convenient it is in her books that she can give Robert Templeton all of this knowledge about like rigor mortis, and this and that, and that she herself doesn't actually know any of this.

Charis Ellison 21:31

Like, she doesn't actually have to know what the temperature of the body is supposed to be or what it means or--

Sharon Hsu 21:36

So making clear kind of the amount of work that's involved in writing a detective novel, and yeah.

Charis Ellison 21:43

Yeah, and I love the fact that there's a reference where she's like, if, if she had ever written a book about tides, she would know all about them, because she would have researched it, but she doesn't.

And she had avoided it on purpose, so that she wouldn't have to deal with it. Whereas the tide obviously is crucial to this mystery. And Sayers obviously did have to spend some time thinking about tides and tide tables.

Sharon Hsu 22:08

Tide tables! Can't get away from them.

Charis Ellison 22:10

Cannot escape.

Sharon Hsu 22:12

Yeah, and it's funny because then the next chapter is Harriet trying to get down the road like after she's photographed the corpse and, you know, searched the pockets as well as she's able--

Charis Ellison 22:22

And she's looked for a weapon and found the razor, a cutthroat razor.

Sharon Hsu 22:29

Yes, kind of in that hollow basin below the corpse and, you know, she even had the wherewithal to, she notices a set of footprints and, you know, she takes off a shoe and tries to match the footprints to make sure that they belong to the body. Because throughout the question is like, Well, did he come and commit suicide? Or was this corpse lured out here and murdered, and then, you know, but there's only one set of footprints. And it was not when Jesus carried the corpse. [both laugh] It seems to be, to match at least the shoes that the body is wearing. But you know, there are also some other things that don't match up. Like he's wearing, the body is also wearing gloves. So Harriet's thinking like well, who, you know, if someone is trying to commit suicide, like why would they wear gloves, and etc, etc. And then in the next chapter, she sets off down the road, because she's trying to find someone, anyone who can come and basically notify the officials and maybe go down and pull the body off the rocks before the tide comes in. And it's, it's a really, I think, wonderful chapter in, in the sense of the form, because Harriet is so frustrated. I mean, she runs into people who, like, don't seem to care, don't seem to know have telephones in their cottages. And I think again, there's this way in which like we as the reader, because we are so closely in her point of view, like we feel that same frustration of like this person, oh, no, they're useless. Like this person, no. But she runs into a guy on the road, who is like, Oh, I, I'm, you know, I'm also on a walking tour. I can't help you. And Harriet thinks to herself "with a foolish relic of Victorianism, she had somehow imagined that a man would display superior energy and resourcefulness. But after all, he was only a human being with the usual outfit of legs and brains." And at one point, she's like, "Harriet wondered why she was asking about the trains," which I have to believe is a bit of a callback to the previous book, but yes, with with all of that roundaboutness eventually she gets to a grocer, who has a telephone.

Charis Ellison 24:38

Yeah, she doesn't make it all the way to Wilvercombe but she gets to a small village on the way there that has a grocery with a telephone. Where she finally gets in contact with the police.

Sharon Hsu 24:50

Yes, she calls the Wilvercombe police station, and reports that she has found a body.

Charis Ellison 24:56

And thisis...what is it...five hours later.

Sharon Hsu 24:59

Mm hmm. I think so because she's had to like double back a bit. Well, because she's going along all the lanes on the road to try to see if there are cottages or people who have cars and so forth. So there's just yeah, there's a lot of back and forth. She's trying to put it in the hands of the police. She also calls the press right afterward. But maybe before we get into that, I'm... [chuckles] I'll just go ahead and ask: Charis, are detective novels police propaganda?

Charis Ellison 25:26

[laughs] I, obviously, this is something that isn't necessarily consistent with all mystery novels.

Sharon Hsu 25:34

Yes. Sorry. I asked that in the most enraging way possible.

Charis Ellison 25:40

But I would say that many of them are or they portray the police as incompetent and harmless, which is not the same as propaganda, but does kind of downplay what the police and what police presence in the world can be like, for many people.

Sharon Hsu 25:58

Yeah. And I mean, obviously, you know, we also know that policing in Great Britain now and particularly also at the time that Sayers writing looks very, very different than what we have in the States. I mean, what we have in the states is quite different from most countries in the world. But yeah, I think in detective novels where there are private detectives, there's often a kind of showing up of like the stupid police person who can't see through the alibi or or even the police person who sort of foils or goes against the detective, you know, kind of thinking back to WHOSE BODY? and Inspector Sugg. Or, like, there's so many policemen in FIVE RED HERRINGS, and they're all wrong. They're the sort of like, affable buffoonish police officer, if not being...I mean, yeah, propaganda was probably the wrong word to use for it. But to, to present...I guess what I'm trying to suss out or get to is that the...like media depictions of any profession do not happen in a vacuum, right? And they are not interpreted in a vacuum. And so there's a way in which like, if all of our media depictions of police are either "Oh, they're great law abiding officers or law enforcement officers, I guess, who help law abiding citizens and solve all their cases (I mean, like the solve rates on Brooklyn 99 and CSI are like astronomical and not real) or they're, they're incompetent and buffoonish, but you know, good hearted...and that has a real world effect.

Charis Ellison 27:37

Yeah.

Sharon Hsu 27:38

Right? And it comes from a perspective. I mean, many people are pointing out right now in the world, like the the ability to depict or understand the police as like always a good presence, always representing the side of justice, also comes from a privileged position.

Charis Ellison 27:55

Mm hmm. I've said it before that one of my other favorite authors is Terry Pratchett. And some of my favorite Terry Pratchett books are the ones that deal with the City Watch in the series within the series of books that focus on the Watch. And I feel like the thing that sets that portrayal apart is that the characters really self examine. Sam Vimes is one of my favorite literary characters. And he, he thinks a lot about what the Watch is for, and who the Watch serves. I should have looked this up before I started talking, because I can't remember now which book it's in. I think it might be in NIGHTWATCH. But at one point, he's thinking about privilege. And he thinks to himself that like privilege just means private law.

Sharon Hsu 28:46

Like literally and figuratively.

Charis Ellison 28:48

Yeah, like, it just means that you get to decide what the law is, and how it's enforced. And that it's important to him that he lead the Watch, you know, in a way, that means, like, the law applies to everyone. But you know, like, there's very much this idea that, like, constantly challenging yourself to be like, Who are you serving? You know, like, what principle are you serving? Like, are you obeying politicians? Or are you obeying the law? Like, are you serving the people? Or are you serving, you know, something else?

Sharon Hsu 29:24

Right. Capitalism or like your own place in society?

Charis Ellison 29:29

Yeah. Like, are you supporting privilege, which is private law, and people getting to decide what the law is based on their power? Or are you obeying a law that applies to everyone and is an equalizing force?

Sharon Hsu 29:45

Which is such a, I mean, you know, I know we're talking...like I want to be very careful not to read backwards. But I think that dovetails really nicely with discussions that we've had previously with regards to Peter and how Peter's sense of justice and morality aren't like...we've seen books where that doesn't match up with what the police are theorizing. And there is something to untangle there because I think...I don't think Sayers ever, I don't think she does a one-to-one like, I don't think we're meant to think like, oh, because Peter is an aristocratic, that's why he has a finer moral sensibility, right? Like we've obviously seen from the people in his family that that is not the equation. Which I think some other books of this period and prior fall into a bit of like, Oh, yes, the nobility are inherently noble, or like people rise to, you know, sort of these positions in life because they are better, more moral, than other people. I don't think Sanders is saying that AT ALL. I think she's saying there is something innate about

Peter's sensibility and his...the care with which he approaches the world and his ability to empathize with lots of different kinds of temperaments and people of different classes and backgrounds that suits him to be the...the avatar of justice, I suppose, even when the police can't be and him feeling that veil come up between himself and Parker. But I also, yeah, I wonder if there's a way to in which like, that portrayal can also be...I don't know, like dangerous if taken too far? Because, in a way, what we're saying is like, Peter is unto himself a private kind of law. Right?

Charis Ellison 31:35

Right. And, you know, and we've talked a little bit about, like, the fact that he's the detective. And that, in general, the detective in mystery novels is the like, the arbiter of justice. And that's a role that they play, you know, like you think of Poirot doing his summation at the end of the case.

Sharon Hsu 31:56

Right? Or, or Miss Marple saying, like, "I am Nemesis" at one point, the nemesis to evildoers.

Charis Ellison 32:03

And so like the fact that that it's, it's, I feel like the the measurement in mystery novels is the fact that the detective being the one who is smart enough to figure out the crime is what gives them the right to be the arbiter of justice. Like, I feel like that's kind of like a thing that an unspoken law that's underneath. Which, like, I don't know what that says about like, extrapolating that to like, a broader, and like, I don't even know if extrapolating from that to, like, kind of a like a broader worldview would even make sense, because we're talking about a genre that has its own rules, and these things operate within those rules. But yeah, but like you said, Nothing exists in a vacuum and like, what do we take away from this? When we read within the genre, and then we, you know, look up into the real world, and we've been seeing things through this lens?

Sharon Hsu 32:55

Right. And I think there is, you know, I mean, there are real world movements or like real historical people who, who did take that stance of like, I'm smarter than other people. So, you know, I mean, thinking back to, like, terrible conversations about eugenics that were happening at the time that Sayers was writing, and the that attitude of like, that, that, like a small set of people had the right to interfere with other people's bodily autonomy because they thought of themselves as being clever or more intelligent or more dedicated to, you know, the human race in some way. Which I'm not saying, I definitely don't think there's like a direct line between reading mystery novels and, and that horrific attitude, but I think it's something that I am interested in, I think just for myself, as we reread to, to kind of tease out, like, you know, how is it that most people read mystery fiction and come across these attitudes and are able to leave it as, as you said, like, this is a trope of detective novels, right, that the detective is smarter than everybody else? And how is it that some people take that as like, this is the way the world should be like, that the the intelligent, or the rich, or the whoever should rule over the rest of us? And, you know, maybe those people aren't reading enough mystery novels, or at least the the complicated ones, like the ones that Sayers is writing where, you know, Peter is constantly wondering what right he has to actually bring about justice.

Charis Ellison 34:33

Yeah. Which, you know, I can't think of another mystery novel that does that. You know, I can't think of another detective that has that same struggle, which is not to say that there are none, but I can't think of any.

Sharon Hsu 34:46

Yeah. I feel like Tana French...I mean, granted, I don't read a lot of contemporary thriller mysteries, but I feel like Tana French does come close because her mysteries are such like deep psychological portraits of the detectives involved, and she certainly has tackled, like, you know, there's one book of hers I'm thinking of in particular where it's, it's kind of all about corruption within the police force, right? But yeah, I don't, I can't think of...certainly none of Sayers' contemporaries are ending their books with the detectives having psychological breakdowns because of the responsibility they've taken upon themselves. Yeah, I'm sorry, I took us off on like, a really long tangent.

Charis Ellison 35:26

Yeah. I mean, like, you know, it was, it's on our minds, I'm sure it's on our listeners' minds. And it's, it doesn't hurt anyone to stop to interrogate what you consume, you know, but where do we go from there? We don't have a segue way.

Sharon Hsu 35:46

We do not have a segue way. But I think 20 minutes ago, or whenever I started off on that, I said that Harriet calls the police. And then she calls the press, which I think might be an interesting thing to talk about next. Because I, I will confess that...I mean, it's not really even a confession. I guess just by dint of the fact that GAUDY NIGHT is one of my favorite books ever, not just one of my favorite Lord Peter books, and that I was, you know, working on a chapter about it for my dissertation, that's the Harriet-Peter book I've read the most. And it's interesting, you know, I think we could we could talk also more about how maybe some of the characterization of Harriet keeps evolving. But my, my sense of Harriet from that book has always been that she very much wanted to avoid publicity or notoriety or that she felt a certain sense of shame and embarrassment, at least, to go back to Oxford with this kind of notoriety hanging over her, that she was publicly tried for murdering her lover and that it, you know, so that everybody knew that she was living with someone out of wedlock and so forth. So it's always interesting to me, I always find myself like, my brain, sort of, like has a brief halt every time I reread HAVE HIS CARCASS and I see her calling the press and being like, "Oh, yes, you know, Harriet Vane. That's Harriet with two R's. Like the detective novelist, this is my new book, please make sure to note that I found the body" like I, I often kind of don't know what to make of it.

Charis Ellison 37:15

Yeah, I think this is something we'll be able to talk about more when we get to GAUDY NIGHT--

Sharon Hsu 37:22

When we do our year long series...

Charis Ellison 37:25

But in GAUDY NIGHT, she's going back to a place from her past, you know, and she's going back to interact with people who knew her before her life took a scandalous turn. And I think that that's where a

lot of the shame that she feels in that book originates. Whereas in this book, Harriet Vane is kind of in the middle of nowhere, and she's not around people who know her, she's not around her peers, she's not around her friends. And she, I feel like she has this, you know, she's described as like hesitating, she calls the police and that she is kind of with the telephone, and she hesitates before she calls. And I think that she kind of has a moment where she's just like, the police are gonna know who I am. Soon everyone in the town is going to know who I am. Everyone is going to stare at me and whisper about me anyway. So I might as well get some publicity out.

Sharon Hsu 38:23

Right, may as well try to sell some books.

Charis Ellison 38:26

Yeah, yeah. So I think there's very much that attitude of like, I'm in this situation. And I might as well use it to my advantage, because otherwise, it's just going to a lot of unpleasantness. Which, you know, she's kind of had an upbeat attitude, when she was jokingly saying to herself, if I have any luck, it will be a corpse. And when she's talking to the police, and she, I think she said something about like, well, I want to be in on it, because it's good publicity for me. And they're just like...

Sharon Hsu 38:56

But then when they find out her name, it's "the inspector seemed to come to attention rather suddenly." Yeah, that's true. I think maybe there is this aspect of like, because so much was out of her control in that case, and in *STRONG POISON*, that she's trying to, to maintain some amount of control. Not necessarily even reputational control, but just like, if this is going to happen, then then I might as well be the person to set it off in motion.

Charis Ellison 39:26

Yeah. Well, you know, like, it gives her the opportunity to set the tone. And to, to set the tone for the narrative. Like not, I mean, like, really, she's like feeding the person the story, like word for word. So like, it gives her an opportunity to shape the narrative. And I think that's something that's really important to Harriet as a person because the narrative surrounding her trial, she didn't have any control over, you know, she cooperated with the police. She didn't...she knew that she was innocent, and so she just, you know, she didn't feel like she had anything to hide and so she didn't hide anything. And still all the circumstantial evidence was against her. And they're prepared to send her to the gallows. Just because they didn't have a better solution.

Sharon Hsu 40:12

Yep. So I guess that answers our question of "Are the police ever bad in Dorothy Sayers?" Yes.

Charis Ellison 40:21

Yes. Yes, they are. And, I mean, like, we have talked about how much we love Parker. We love Charles Parker, and he is a good policeman, but he is still the police. And he's still part of the machinery of the police, which I think is really key to that moment in *UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE BELLONA CLUB* when he and Peter have that awkward moment where, you know, like a rift kind of forms between them

and that we never quite see that...in STRONG POISON, you know, like they're on good terms, but we don't see them have the same camaraderie that we did in like CLOUDS OF WITNESS.

Sharon Hsu 40:57

Yeah. And, and Parker really kind of falls out of the narrative, right? Peter--

Charis Ellison 41:03

Peter marries him off to Mary.

Sharon Hsu 41:05

So he Reichenbachs Parker through marriage.

Charis Ellison 41:09

But there was just that moment where Peter suddenly sees Parker as the police. And it's just like, Oh, you are part of this machinery. And there is a way in which I can't trust you, because your loyalty is to, to the machinery of the police. So and then you think about the fact that Parker was probably involved in Harriet's arrest.

Sharon Hsu 41:32

eOh, absolutely. Yeah.

Charis Ellison 41:33

And we talked about, it's to his credit that he was anxious to have it corrected. But it's still like, you made this mistake, and this person very nearly died for it. Yeah.

Sharon Hsu 41:46

So speaking of fanfictions, I really want to read the like, lost scene of Harriet and Parker meeting for the first time socially, through Peter after all of that.

Charis Ellison 41:59

[pained] Oooh

Sharon Hsu 42:00

Right?!

Charis Ellison 42:01

Oh, let's be in laws! And this is not weird at all that you arrested me for murder.

Sharon Hsu 42:05

Ugh someone write that for me please. I would just like to commission fanfictions from now on. Back to the book. My goodness.

Charis Ellison 42:15

Oh, yeah. We were talking about a book.

Sharon Hsu 42:17

This book should not be so hard to talk about! We love this book.

Charis Ellison 42:20

We love this book. But it is so hard to focus on anything right now. It is truly. That just that is just the facts. Focusing on anything as hard. And and that's fair.

Sharon Hsu 42:31

Yes. But something you said about Harriet wanting to control the narrative, I think is really key and important. And something I'd like us to keep in mind as we move forward. Because I do think this book is so interested in the narratives that people construct for themselves, the narratives that they try to inhabit. I mean, I know we've talked about this in CLOUDS OF WITNESS that Mary Wimsey was sort of trying on these different personas, right? And I think, as Harriet is observing the people at the hotel, because turns out the corpse was a dancer, a professional dancer at a hotel in Wilvercombe. And Harriet is sort of watching these little tableaux of like, kind of lonely, older women coming to that hotel and dancing with these younger...I mean, the book calls gigolos, I don't think it has the same implication, necessarily, but you know, these these young foreign men who are dancers, and she's kind of watching a show of like a, an outdated, almost predatory and terrible femininity that these women put on. And so like, that's, there's, I feel like there's a narrative about gender that she's watching. There's a narrative about like, mercenary marriage, that certainly, of course, is gonna impact her relationship to Peter, once he shows up, there are narratives that the dancers tell themselves about, this is like a stepping stone to better things. Everybody in this book is kind of spinning a story about who they are and how they belong in the world. And so I think, yeah, it makes a lot of sense that, I mean, I don't...you know, Harriet isn't doing this and I think most of the characters aren't doing this in like a malicious way, but...

Charis Ellison 44:20

Right, but you know, like, it's kind of like, you go on vacation, and you kind of try out different behaviors. You know?

Sharon Hsu 44:27

I do not know, I feel like on vacation, I nap and read a lot. [both laugh]

Charis Ellison 44:32

Yeah, I guess like, I'm not speaking from experience either. But, you know, like, I just realized that I'm thinking of the beginning of GREASE? Where it's just like, you meet on the summer vacation and you're behaving like a totally different person than you are in your everyday high school life. And the never the two shall meet.

Sharon Hsu 44:53

That's true, yes, or that feeling I think that some people have when they go to college or move to a different city, right? That somehow... clean start.

Charis Ellison 45:03

Yeah, yeah. Like you have a chance to reinvent yourself. Compartmentalizing your life. And it's like, in some ways, putting on a performance. So like Wilvercombe is a resort town. It's a spa town, but it's not very fashionable, and it's mostly elderly people. And so it's kind of got this outdated gentility and everyone is kind of putting...in like, especially in the lounge of the hotel, you know, 'cause Harriet goes, she's just like, I am not staying at a hostel or anything. I'm going to go to the nicest hotel. Because that's where I need to be when the newspapers show up. So she goes to this nice hotel, and she ends up in the lounge where you know, like they have waltzing, which is the type of dancing that the professionals dancers are doing--

Sharon Hsu 45:15

Which is a very outdated dance.

Charis Ellison 45:55

Very outdated type of entertainment. People are wearing old fashioned clothes and there's like fans and ostrich feathers and old fashioned flirting.

Sharon Hsu 46:08

Right, she said, "long skirts and costumes of the 70s were in evidence," which I can only imagine she means the 1870s.

Charis Ellison 46:15

Yes. But yeah. And she talks about like corsets and bustles, you know, so it's like this idea that everyone is there to play dress up. You know, like, the comparison that comes to my mind is like the Renaissance Faire, because that's my experience with this type of thing.

Sharon Hsu 46:30

[laughing] Huzzah!

Charis Ellison 46:31

You know, like you go to the Renaissance Fiare, you put on a bodice, push your cleavage up, and you flirt with strangers in a way that you normally never would? And it's, it's just, it's different. Because it's the Renaissance Faire.

Sharon Hsu 46:45

Yes.

Charis Ellison 46:45

And you eat a turkey like, and then you go home and you're normal?

Sharon Hsu 46:48

Yeah, no, I mean, it's carnivalesque. It's like the Bakhtinian point about like Carnival...any, any place where there's an expectation that you're, you know, in costume, and that somehow you're kind of throwing off the the strictures or the expectations of the society at large. And it's a place where people

can kind of, it's not even like a freedom to be your, your real self. It's a freedom to be a different self, right?

Charis Ellison 47:17

And like it's a game and like, Harriet observes that it's a game and she, she makes the commentary. So she's like, Oh, well, they know the rules. You know, it's kind of like This is all fake, but it's fine. Because everyone knows, right? Yeah. Which is, you know, like that atmosphere, I think is a really interesting place to set a novel. Like I am literally right now for the first time [thinking] about how the place is a character in this book, just as much as it is in CLOUDS OF WITNESS or in FIVE RED HERRINGS, but it really is, you know, like the watering hole. And like, spa town atmosphere is very much a part of the story. And it really informs the plot, and I know, like, I didn't have I didn't have a formed thought there. This is me having a thought in real time. And this is how my thoughts go. They deadend.

Sharon Hsu 48:12

Well, I...there's something I think going back to that tie to Jane Austen that we kind of noticed in the first paragraph. It's, you know, people in Jane Austen are always going to the shore to misbehave. Right?

Charis Ellison 48:25

Right.

Sharon Hsu 48:26

But I think there's something...I mean, we, you know, we could put more of a lampshade on like the shore as a liminal place where the water and the land meet and boundaries are murky and so identity becomes shifting ;a la la la la. We could do that thing but I think--

Charis Ellison 48:46

If someone would like to write us the paper we will read it.

Sharon Hsu 48:49

Yeah, we will read it with great interest. But I think there is something really interesting about choosing the shore as I said, and and Sayers I think does increasingly pay attention to place and location in these books. I mean, I guess we first see it sort of in CLOUDS OF WITNESS, that country house kind of setting. But thinking about the meticulous attention to place in FIVE RED HERRINGS, thinking about Wilvercombe as a setting that is also like really realized in this book and almost a character. MURDER MUST ADVERTISE, we go back to London, but it's like the very specific setting of a publicity [office]--

Charis Ellison 49:34

It's almost like a different London than London we've been in before.

Sharon Hsu 49:38

Yeah, it's so lovingly detailed, whereas I mean, in WHOSE BODY? it's like, well, we could kind of be in any city and then obviously GAUDY NIGHT being the Oxford book and NINE TAILORS being very drawn from like the landscape of Sayers' childhood and, and all of that, so I don't know there's another paper in that I'm sure someone somewhere can write.

Charis Ellison 49:59

And we would be happy to read all the papers--

Sharon Hsu 50:03

And write none of them ourselves.

Charis Ellison 50:05

None of them ourselves. We are old. We don't do that anymore.

Sharon Hsu 50:09

We do not. Those days are behind us.

Charis Ellison 50:12

Like on that note, I think we might want to devote six episodes to HAVE HIS CARCASE. Because it's a longer book. And we I think that we might need the time. Because we're going to talk about more than the book. You know? And I think we should just give ourselves the space.

Sharon Hsu 50:32

Yeah, I think that that feels fair. In some ways, it might be a good moment to pause and reflect on not just the larger themes that we're noticing. But how the exercise of reading a series that we both love so much this closely, and in some ways during a time of like a lot of upheaval in the world, like what that does to our reading practice, how that changes our perception of these books and so forth. I don't think anyone...hopefully no one will mind.

Charis Ellison 51:02

If they mind they don't have to listen, I guess. This is our podcast. It's not monetized.

Sharon Hsu 51:08

It is definitely not monetized. Well, Charis, you and I have been talking very much at length. I hope our listeners don't mind the fact that you know, you and I just had to share some thoughts.

Charis Ellison 51:25

Sometimes you just need to talk to your friends.

Sharon Hsu 51:27

Sometimes you just need to talk to your friends. And I think this is one of them. But we have managed to get through three chapters. We will attempt to do better next time, dear listeners, clearly we're going to probably devote more than four episodes to HAVE HIS CARCASE because there is there's a lot to talk about. We love this book. But we hope that if you needed a distraction, hearing us ramble about our various trips to England was a was a good reprieve. And if you you know, wanted to think about the role of policing and detective, then here you go. But next time--

Charis Ellison 52:08

Please write us a paper.

Sharon Hsu 52:09

Please write us a paper. But yeah, next time we'll be back and we'll pick up right when Lord Peter comes waltzing in to--

Charis Ellison 52:18

--almost literally--

Sharon Hsu 52:19

--, almost literally, yes, to following the siren call of a corpse.

Charis Ellison 52:24

Yes. And yeah, we'll focus a bit more on the the mystery at hand.

Sharon Hsu 52:31

The book itself?

Charis Ellison 52:33

Yes, yes. Oh, are we talking about a book?

Sharon Hsu 52:36

What? Is that what this podcast is about? Surprise.

Charis Ellison 52:39

Someone should have told us.

Sharon Hsu 52:41

Yeah, we do hope you'll join us in two weeks for whatever is going to come to our brains next.

Charis Ellison 52:49

In the meantime, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram, as @wimseypod. That's Wimsey spelled w-i-m-s-e-y, and you can find transcripts and show notes of our episodes on our website at asmywise.com

Sharon Hsu 53:06

Our logo is by Gabby Vicioso and our theme music was composed and recorded by Sarah Meholick. If you've enjoyed this episode of As My Wimsey Takes Me, we'd love for you to give us a rating and review on Apple podcasts or on your podcatcher of choice. And we also hope that you'll tell all your friends who love Dorothy L. Sayers as much as we do.

Charis Ellison 53:26

Join us next time for more talking piffle!