

A Conversation with P. D. James

Celebrated mystery novelist speaks her mind

with crime fiction reviewer Jim Napier

With eighteen bestselling novels and three works of non-fiction to her credit over the past five decades, at the impressive age of ninety P. D. James continues to rank among the most enduring of British crime writers. The honours heaped on her are equally imposing: a partial list includes winning both the MWA's Best Novel award and the CWA's Macallan Silver Dagger for 1971; repeating the feat again in 1986; receiving the CWA's Cartier Diamond Dagger for lifetime achievement in 1987, created Baroness James (and named to the House of Lords) for her services to British letters in 1991, named a Grandmaster by the MWA in 1999, and inducted into the International Crime Writing Hall of Fame in 2008.

Recently I had an opportunity to speak with James at some length by telephone from her London home. As engaging and perceptive as ever, she spoke candidly about her own writing and her personal views on crime and detective fiction. What follows is an excerpt from that conversation.

“You are justly celebrated for a great many things,” I began, “but perhaps most of all for your thirteen novels featuring police detective Adam Dalgliesh. On the face of it, he’s a rather unlikely protagonist: a very high ranking officer in London’s Metropolitan Police, a widower, and a very private



person who’s also a published poet. He first appeared in 1962, and I suspect there were not too many members of the Met at that time who suggested his character. So what led you to give him these

unique features,” I asked, “and was he based on anyone you knew?”

“Well, I deliberately made him unusual,” she replied. “I didn’t see why a detective should be so stereotyped. The most important thing in Dalgliesh’s life is his poetry. But he doesn’t want to be a professional poet, going round to literary events and reading his work. He’s very private, and he wants a job in the real world, preferably with an element of danger in it. He’s certainly unusual, but I don’t see any reason why he shouldn’t be so. In a case here in England recently the body of a woman was found in a suitcase; but...the lead detective was an Oxford graduate who had taken a degree in theology! On the

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face of it [that's] not an average detective, [but] he was extremely effective and he solved the crime."

"So how would you compare Dalgliesh with other fictional detectives of, say, the past twenty years?" I asked. "How is he like, or unlike, for example, Inspector Morse?"

"Like Morse, Dalgliesh is a professional policeman," she said. "Professionals act within the rules. They know how far they can go, and they get results by staying within those rules. Amateurs have much more freedom of movement, and there is a great difference in how they operate. But Morse and Dalgliesh would get along well, although Dalgliesh relies a lot on scientific evidence, forensic information, while Colin [Dexter, author of the Inspector Morse novels] isn't very interested in forensics."

"In 1972 you introduced a young woman, Cordelia

Grey, as a professional private investigator in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, and featured her again in 1982's *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, but not after that. Cordelia is such an interesting figure, with so much potential as a protagonist, that I wonder why you haven't used her more over the years, and whether you have any plans to do so."

"I would like to have done, but a film company asked to use the character in their own stories, as happened with Inspector Morse...and I said yes, and they made a terrible hash of it: the actress became pregnant, and the producers made her into an unmarried mother and an extremely stupid detective. They ruined my character for me," she admitted. "If I ever wrote about her again I would have to have a note at the beginning saying forget everything you've seen on the screen; that was not my Cordelia Grey. It was a

pity I did it, but I haven't minded as much, because having created Kate Mishkin as an aide to Commander Dalgleish I am able to write about a very credible woman detective, who's got a great deal in common with Cordelia."

"A cautionary tale for aspiring writers," I agreed. "By moving crime fiction from traditional plot-driven tales with ingenious, but often far-fetched puzzles at their heart, to character-driven stories, about three-dimensional people with believable lives full of conflicting emotions and contradictory actions, you raised the genre of crime fiction to the level of serious and mainstream literature. Yet even today some readers (and not a few writers) denigrate crime writing as somehow "second best," and inferior to so-called "literary" fiction. What would you say to those critics who see crime fiction as limiting?"

Well frankly, I don't think

I'd bother much with them. I don't think it happens [in Britain], and I don't think it happens in France and in Scandinavia. Maybe in those countries the writing is better. I think in Britain the standard of crime writing, on the whole, is very high, and people like Ruth Rendell, for example, and the Scottish writers are regarded as serious novelists. As far as I'm concerned it's very difficult to think you're writing in a despised genre when you've got six honorary degrees as Doctor of Literature and chaired the Booker judges! No one is invited to chair the Bookers who isn't regarded as a very good, and serious, novelist. So we just don't have [that bias] to the same extent here. A great many mysteries wouldn't see the light of day if they weren't mysteries, but the same can be said about mainstream literature.... I set out to write a good novel which at the same time is a credible and exciting mystery,

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because I love the structure and the form and the conventions, and I think I can walk within them and still create living characters and [reveal] some truths about them and about the society in which we live.”

“A refreshing response to would-be pundits. Turning back to your own works, many authors say they view their own novels almost like children, and say they can’t choose between them. Do you have a personal favourite, or is there one you most enjoyed writing?” I asked.

“I think they’re being quite honest, frankly,” she said. “You love each of your children for different reasons. The first book is always rather exciting, because now, you know, you are a published writer. So there’s always an affection for it. Most authors experience a progression in their art: they’re improving and they know they’re improving, so they’d probably put the last

one as their favourite, and of course it’s the one you’re closest to. For me the last one [*The Private Patient*] was the most pleasurable to write. It seemed to come together almost miraculously. The last third of it was written while I was recovering from heart failure in a convalescent hospital. It wasn’t very noisy, and I had a room of my own, and my secretary would come down twice a week and take dictation, and it progressed very satisfactorily.”

I couldn’t help observing that it seemed to be carrying the quest for authenticity a bit far, to check into a hospital for the sake of the atmosphere.

She laughed. “Well, of course I was there because I needed to be. I was able to take advantage of the privacy and quiet, but I wouldn’t recommend it!”

Every writer, of course, has his or her own technique, or method of writing. I asked

James how much planning went into her books before she began writing, and how her working day takes shape.

“A great deal of plotting and planning, a huge amount,” she admitted. “The books take as long to plot and plan as they do to write. I usually begin with a setting, which sparks off my imagination. I have a very strong response to what I think of as the spirit of a place. And then come the characters, and only [after these] the details of the plot. It’s all written down [beforehand] and all the research is done, and there are lots of charts, with details of the weather. I go back to the setting over and over again and take photographs. But when I begin to write the book it does change: the characters seem to reveal themselves to me in greater detail, and sometimes seem to do rather unexpected things. So I never get exactly the book that I thought I was

going to write.”

Many writers say that characters sometimes take over their story. I asked her if she’d ever gotten to the point that a principal character in a story, someone she’d picked to be the culprit, couldn’t in fact be the culprit because of the way they were developing.

“It’s never happened as drastically as that,” she replied, “but certainly they do change. I get a new idea about motives, something that might have happened to [my characters] in childhood or in their past lives...and I will incorporate this into the book. [But] it’s not so much that they take over. It feels like I am living with them, and they are revealing themselves to me more and more.”

“Another major feature of your writing is what I might term its moral dimension,” I said. “You mention in *Talking About Detective Fiction* that the mystery

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novels of the Golden Age are typically novels of escape, and we don't have any great investment in the characters as such. But in your latest novel, *Private Patient*, Dalgliesh is challenged by someone who puts a question to him that students in introductory philosophy courses are often asked to confront: would you be willing to break a law if by doing so you could right a wrong or benefit a person you love? And Dalgliesh's response is interesting: he says it must depend on the importance and reasonableness of the law, in that the good would be greater than the harm of breaking it. Now that's a very philosophical response, and it seems to me typical of your books that you confront complex, even agonizing, moral dilemmas head-on. I think that's a distinction of your work, and marks the progression of the genre from earlier writers."

"Yes, I agree," she said. "I

think that the ethical aspect of life, and [such] problems, are tremendously important. They're important to me and they're important to the characters in my novels. I think that Dalgliesh is being honest when he says that if someone he knew were suffering intolerably he might do something about it. And we all face that in our minds at some time or other. But it's not a question we get in the Golden Age, which was concerned with an intellectual puzzle.... The plot was dominant; everything else served the plot. The arch-priestess of this kind of writing was Agatha Christie, and [although] she could bring [her characters] alive, at the end of the book you sometimes felt that that person would not have acted that way. It somehow didn't seem to matter, because solving the puzzle, and being surprised by the [solution], was what was important. Nowadays, I

think, we are trying to write much more realistic novels, where characters almost come first. The detective story, in the right hands, has moved much closer to straight novels, where the characterization is [more] subtle, and true to life."

P. D. James' latest book, Talking About Detective Fiction, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 2009. A wide-ranging, informed narrative of the genre, James is donating all her royalties from this book to the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

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