

Death Comes To P. D. James

Acclaimed writer extended boundaries of crime fiction

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

November 27, 2014: word came today that acclaimed crime writer P. D. James died peacefully at her home in Oxford at the age of 94.

An icon in the world of crime fiction, James' lengthy career bridged the end of the Golden Age of British crime fiction to the present day, her first novel, *Cover Her Face*, appearing in 1962, and her most recent, *Death Comes to Pemberley*, in 2011.

James entered the world of crime writing almost by accident, through her early work in Britain's Home Office, first in forensics and later in the criminal law department, both of which prepared her well for her later writing career.

Her nuanced characters and layered plots often transcended the distinction between prose and poetry, just as the protagonist of many of her stories, Adam Dalgleish, was both a detective and a published poet.



"It was one of those perfect English autumnal days which occur more frequently in memory than in life."

P. D. James

Her novels were carefully structured and always addressed the moral dimensions of her stories. A parti-

cular hallmark of James' novels was her careful attention to character: eschewing the creation of two-dimensional stereotypes that had dominated earlier crime fiction, she



gave her figures genuine depth and complexity. As a result of each of these emphases her work challenged the distinction between crime fiction and literary fiction, and her works gave other writers new freedom to explore and extend the limits of their own work. Indeed, much of the diversity and depth that characterizes contemporary crime fiction can be traced to her influence.

Throughout her career James was extremely generous with her time,

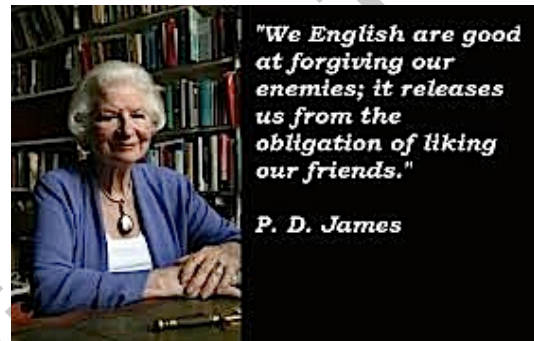
prominently featured in crime writing events, and assisting and supporting aspiring writers in their work. One of her last books was a non-fiction work entitled *Talking About Detective Fiction*, and James donated all her royalties from the book to the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

In 1987 James was awarded the Crime Writers' Association Diamond Dagger award for lifetime achievement, and, in 2005, the Medal of Honour for Literature from Britain's National Arts Club. Three years later she was inducted into the International Crime Writers Hall of Fame; but among the many honours bestowed on James for her work, one of the most noteworthy was certainly her being granted a life peerage as Baroness James of Holland Park, an honour shared only with one other crime writer, her good friend Ruth Rendell.

An exclusive and extended interview with P. D. James, conducted in 2010, can be found on the website <http://deadlydiversions.com>

Jim Napier can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

I had the very great pleasure of corresponding with P. D. James (Phyllis to her friends, though I could never bring myself to call her that), and meeting her at several crime writing functions over the last two decades of her life. Not surprisingly, she was very much of the Old School, unfailingly polite, generous with her time, and astute—as well as witty and candid—in her observations.



In the end, P. D. James deserves the highest praise we can give someone when they pass from the scene: she will be missed, but we are all the richer for having had her in our lives.