

When Reality Bites, Escapism is Good

Suspended Sentences

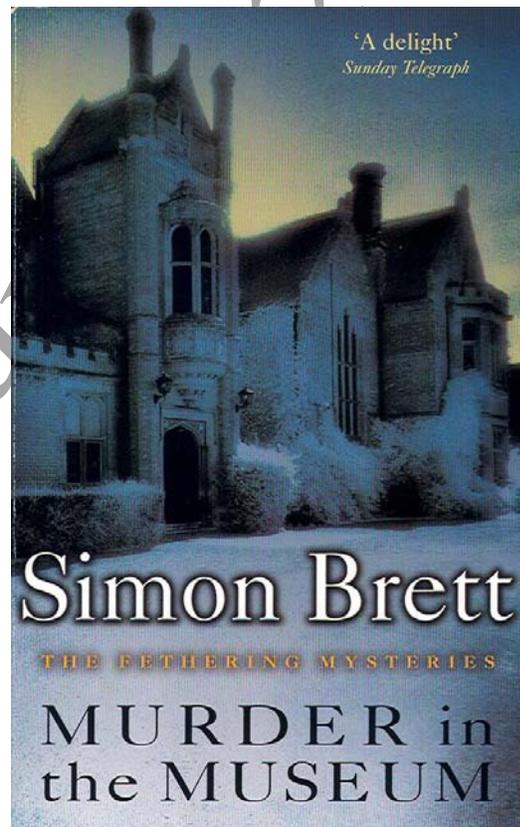
by Jim Napier

Already half over, the first decade of the Third Millennium has not been especially kind, what with tsunamis, hurricanes, wars, and the threats of global warming and viral pandemics. Much recent crime writing has taken a similar path, focusing on the darker corners of the human soul, and exploring natural catastrophes and imaginative ways for twisted human beings to inflict suffering on one another. It is, encouraging, then, that there persists a market for traditional mystery fiction, with its emphasis on genuine puzzles for plots, set in a sequestered world inhabited by mostly gentle eccentrics. This week's author stands out amongst those who write "cozies," as such novels are termed, both for the quality and the quantity of his writing. And although some readers might see such novels as irrelevant in today's turbulent world, I would argue that they are precisely the opposite: never have we needed more urgently novels that remind us that there is a more prosaic, gentler (if occasionally murderous) and indeed humourous world out there than the one described in the turgid headlines of our daily newspapers.

Simon Brett

One of Britain's most prolific contemporary crime writers, Simon Brett began his career in the creative arts as a radio and television producer before turning to writing novels full-time. Viewers may recall his charming domestic comedy, "After Henry," starring Prunella Scales

(of "Fawlty Towers" fame), which aired on British, and later on Canadian, television. Over the past three decades Brett has penned well over fifty novels and plays, as well as editing several classic anthologies in the mystery genre. His 1986 novel, *A shock to the System*, was nominated for an Edgar Award, and



was later turned into a film starring Michael Caine. Organised into several distinct series (the Charles Paris novels, the Mrs. Pargeter series, and the Fethering novels), the protagonist may differ, but the novels are, without exception, cozies, deliberately lacking in explicit or graphic violence, but with an

always captivating plot, imbued with the sly sense of humour that characterises their author. Simon Brett lives with his wife and three children in the village of Burpham, near Arundel, in the South Downs.

Murder in the Museum
(Macmillan, 2003)

Bracketts is in trouble. A minor country-house museum dedicated to preserving the literary heritage of Esmond Chadleigh (a long-dead poet of modest abilities) it is teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. The Board of Trustees is torn between making sweeping changes proposed by Gina Locke, their new director, and bending to the will of Sheila Cartwright, the domineering founder of the museum.

It turns out that money is the least of their problems. First, workers preparing the gardens for Spring planting unearth a human skull. Its presence raises disturbing questions about a former gardener at Bracketts, Mervyn Hunter, who is serving a life sentence for murder in a nearby minimum-security prison. And when Marla Teischbaum, an American professor researching Chadleigh's life for a biography, seeks access to the Trust archives, her efforts are strongly resisted by the poet's sole surviving relatives, daughter Belinda and grandson Graham Chadleigh-Bewes.

Newly-appointed trustee Carole Seddon tries to thread her way amongst the various contestants in this multifaceted battle of wills. Aided by a literary expert, she doggedly pursues the truth about the enigmatic poet, reaching back to the horrors of Passchendaele and the First World War. In the process she

finds herself in mortal jeopardy, with yet more deaths in store.

A darkly humorous tale

Murder in the Museum is an urbane, literate tale that is by turns tragic, engaging, and darkly humorous. It is a perceptive study of the venality that often underlies personal ambition, the corruption that can take place within families, and the posturing and petty conflicts all too characteristic of institutional boards. The village setting is familiar to anyone who has wandered the rural roads of England; the characters are all-too-believable; and the dialogue is crisp and always in character. *Murder in the Museum* is an excellent cozy, as engrossing as it is enjoyable. I recommend it highly.

Previous volumes in the Fethering series include *The Body on the Beach*, *Death on the Downs*, *The Torso in the Town*, and *The Hanging in the Hotel*. (Do we see a pattern here?) Book seven, *The Stabbing in the Stables*, was released in March of 2006.

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