

What goes around...

When imitation really is flattery

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

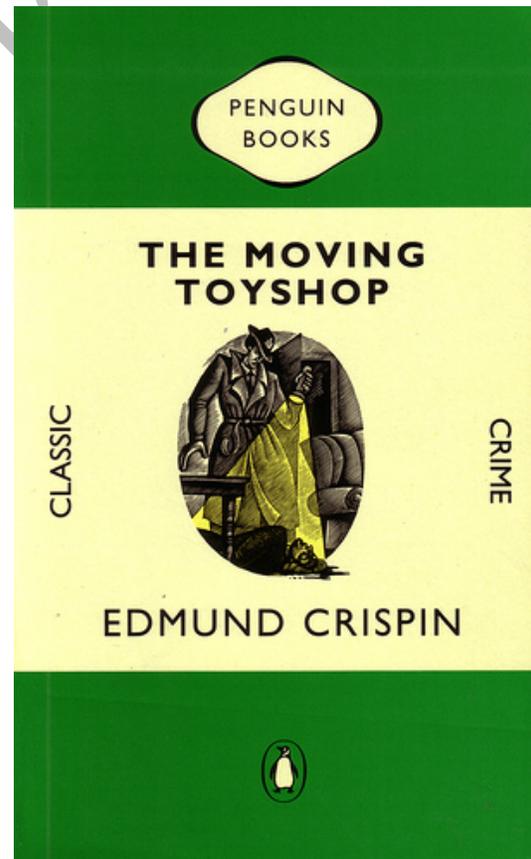
It's been said that there are just seven plots for mystery novels. That might or might not be true, but certainly reviewers often get a case of *déjà vu* when reading a recent release. Happily, sometimes imitation really *is* the sincerest form of flattery, with the later work being every bit as good as the original; a win-win for readers. Such is the case with a pair of novels penned, respectively, by Edmund Crispin and Christopher Fowler, separated by over half a century.

Edmund Crispin was the *nom de plume* of Bruce Montgomery (1921-78), who was by turns an organist and choirmaster, later writer and composer, and was for many years the regular crime-fiction reviewer for the London *Sunday Times*. A fan of John Dickson Carr, his own mystery novels were published primarily between 1944 and 1953.

Edmund Crispin, **The Moving Toyshop (1946)**

Poet Richard Cadogan travels from London to Oxford, badly in need of a vacation (who knew poets were stressed?). On entering the city late at night he searches for a place to stay. Finding the door to a toyshop in the Iffley Road unlocked, he enters the premises. Inside, on the first (or to North Americans, second,) floor he literally trips over the body of an elderly woman, who has been strangled.

Hearing someone nearby he tries to escape, but before he can do so he is attacked and knocked unconscious. When he comes around he manages to climb out a window and makes his way to the police. They listen to his story and return to the scene. What they find forms the basis for the tale; for not only has the body disappeared, so has the bookstore! In its place is a small grocery shop. The police are understanding; they chalk it up to a misunderstanding, due to the blow to his head.

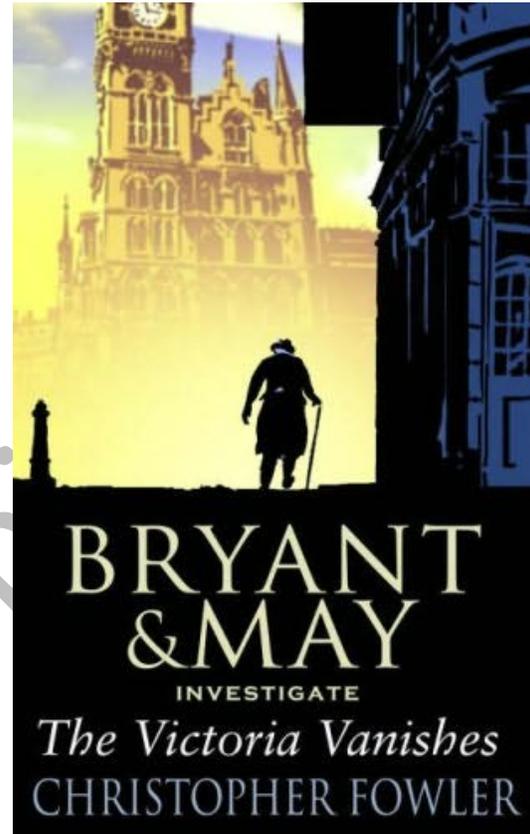


Cadogan enlists the help of a friend to help solve the mystery. Gervaise Fen, a Professor of English Language and Literature, is a flamboyant, almost literally larger-than-life figure with an ostentatious (if unreliable) motorcar named Lily Christine III. The pair find themselves enmeshed in a mind-boggling mix of improbable chase scenes, devilish clues (including limericks from *The Nonsense Poems of Edward Lear*), the whole suffused by admittedly droll humour. The humour is often coy: in one scene, bound up helplessly by the culprits, Fen amuses himself by thinking up titles for subsequent tales in the self-same series: "Murder Stalks the University, The Blood on the Mortarboard; Fen Strikes Back." When Fen is informed that an undergraduate student has dropped off an essay for him, he replies, "That must be Larkin: the most indefatigable searcher-out of pointless correspondences the world has ever known." The reference is to the respected poet Philip Larkin, a close friend of Crispin's, to whom this very book is dedicated.

Anthony Boucher described Crispin as a blend of John Dickson Carr, Michael Innes, and the Marx Brothers, and as usual he was not far off. Crispin's novels are characterized by farcical humour tied to the eccentricities of Oxford academics. If he goes overboard at times (ok, almost all of the time) that is an essential part of his charm.

Enter Christopher Fowler, author of a series of delightfully-eccentric tales chronicling the exploits of a quirky pair of septuagenarian London-based sleuths. Fowler appeals to readers in search of character-driven puzzles in the traditional style. His protagonists Arthur Bryant and John May (their names are

taken from an English company that manufactures matches) are members of the Peculiar Crimes Unit, a fictional division replete with a cat named Crippen; Fowler insists it is based on a genuine unit created during the Second World War.



**Christopher Fowler,
The Victoria Vanishes (2008)**

In *The Victoria Vanishes* the aging miscreants are planning to mark the retirement of one of their number, Oswald Finch, a forensic pathologist. Lamentably, Finch dies under his own examination table shortly before his retirement party is to take place. He is cremated, and the party quickly becomes a wake. The beer and sausage rolls are taken from the departmental morgue refrigerator to a nearby pub to mark a noteworthy career. The inscription on the retirement cake is quickly modified

from *Wishing You the Best in Hastings* to *Wishing You the Best in Heaven*. Ever a man for sentiment, Arthur Bryant even brings along the funeral urn containing his late colleague's ashes. Unfortunately, what with one thing and another he neglects to retrieve the urn on his way out. When he discovers his solecism, he returns to the scene in a panic. To his astonishment and dismay not only the urn is missing; the pub itself has disappeared.

Firmly tongue in cheek, the plot of Fowler's parody has more wrinkles than a cheap suit. But the author denies that the series can be described as cosy, noting that he raises social issues and has his protagonists disrupt the system in the name of justice.

The Moving Toyshop and *The Victoria Vanishes* share a gently mordant wit, a captivating puzzle, and a cast of oddballs that will keep their fans in stitches. Each is a fine tale, though (understandably) the literary style of Crispin's tale reflects the age in which it was written. We are the richer for them both.

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