

The Queen of Crime

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

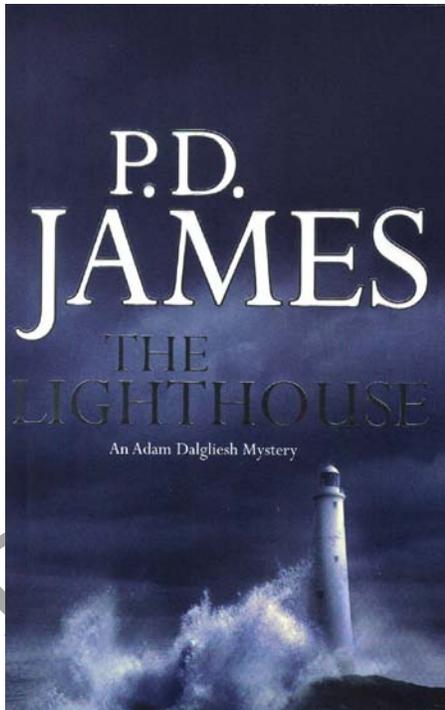
It's been said before, but remains true, that we live in an era of the commonplace and the shoddy. From clothes to cars to custom-built homes, it's becoming increasingly hard to find quality and care in the artifacts that surround us; as a result, we often resign ourselves to settling for second-best. Nowhere is that more true than in the publishing realm, where all too often the standard of writing is—or should be—embarrassing for authors and publishers, and dismaying for readers. It's even gotten to the point that authors feel no misgivings about fictionalizing their (alleged) biographies, and presenting them as fact. Oprah was embarrassed, to say the least, when she was recently taken in by one such hoax.

Happily, that is not always the case. There are a few really fine writers out there, and some of them have chosen the genre of mystery and crime fiction to make their home. This week's pick is at the very top of the list.

P. D. James

She is, quite simply, the Queen of Crime. Not since Agatha Christie has one author so completely dominated the genre of British mystery fiction. And at age eighty-five, P. D. James (Phyllis to her friends) is clearly

still at the top of her form. Created Baroness of Holland Park in 1991 for her literary achievements, she has written eighteen previous books, seventeen of which involve New Scotland Yard detective (and published poet) Adam Dalgliesh. Over the decades he has advanced from Inspector to Chief Inspector, to Super-intendent, to Chief Super-intendent, until today he is a Commander in the London Metropolitan Police, and permanent ADC to the Commissioner himself. One might expect that having achieved that rank, his work day would consist largely of attending meetings and writing policy reports; but when a crime of national proportions occurs, one demanding both discretion and resolve, more often than not Adam Dalgliesh is summoned, and is invariably up to the task.



The Lighthouse (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)

Off the Cornish coast lies a tiny speck of land consisting of half a dozen cottages and Combe House, ancestral home of the Holcombes. A gift to the nation, the island serves as sanctuary for the Great and Powerful in search of absolute privacy and a much-needed rest. Apart from the junior staff, its current residents include the last surviving family member, Emily Holcombe, who under the terms of the bequest is

allowed to live there permanently, and Dr. Guy Staveley, who sought refuge as the island's physician when he was implicated in a young child's death. Current guests consist of Nathan Oliver, an abrasive writer with a global following; his daughter Miranda and his copy-editor, Dennis Tremlett; Dr. Raimund Speidel, a retired German diplomat; and Dr. Mark Yelland, director of a medical research laboratory.

Nathan Oliver is adept at making enemies. He ruthlessly exploits his assistant, gratuitously quarrels with Dr. Yelland over the ethics of animal experimentation, and threatens to invoke a condition of the Holcombe family bequest which allows those born on the island to take up permanent residence there. There is surprise, then, but not regret, when he is found hanging from the railing on the island's lighthouse. Because of the delicacy of the situation—the island's future as a sanctuary is threatened by the high-profile nature of its residents—Adam Dalgleish and his team (Detective Inspector Kate Miskin and Sergeant Francis Benton-Smith) are dispatched to solve the crime with a minimum of publicity and in the shortest possible time. The trail of clues leads all the way back to the Second World War, but circumstances intervene, and before Dalgleish can close the case another person is murdered, and Dalgleish himself comes down with a life-threatening illness. Even as he lapses in and out of consciousness Dalgleish struggles to solve the mystery of this cloistered community.

An original tale, exquisitely told

The Lighthouse is a classic mystery in the British tradition, with a closed circle of suspects, many of whom have motives for murder. As such it will not disappoint P.D. James' legions of fans around the world. However, as with most of her books, it is not the finely detailed plot, but the attention

given to character and setting that will appeal to most of her readers. Simply put, there is no writer alive today, in any genre, that is better at describing the subtle nuances of place or exploring the dark recesses of the human soul. It has been said that P. D. James is responsible for elevating crime fiction to the level of mainstream literary fiction, and that is true. By so doing, she has not only left her readers with a rich legacy of work, she has also raised the bar for all other mystery writers. If you enjoy an original tale, exquisitely told, you will treasure *The Lighthouse*.

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