

Top of her form

P. D. James' latest hits the mark

Suspended Sentences

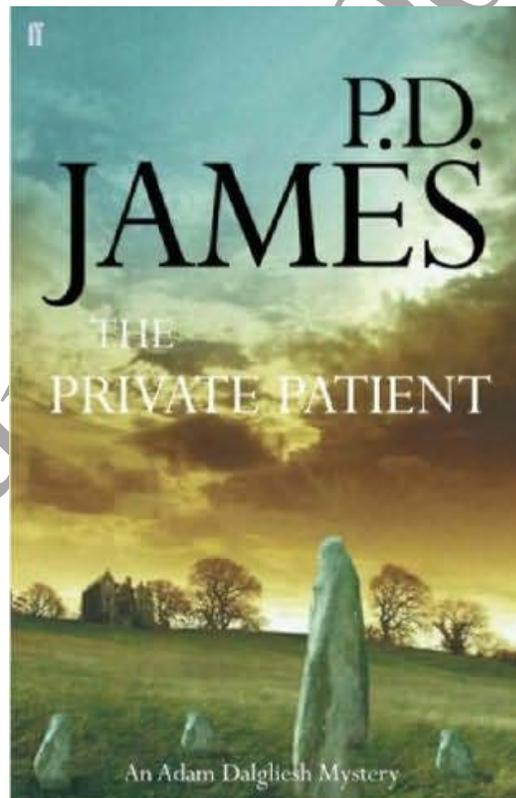
by Jim Napier

If you were to read just one mystery novelist, P. D. James would be the person to pick. Beginning in 1962 she virtually reinvented the modern puzzle mystery, subsequently giving the world its first professional female sleuth, Cordelia Grey, who sprang from her pen fully formed in 1972, in her sardonically-titled novel, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. But the centerpiece of her work is clearly Adam Dalgliesh, poet, lover, and for some years a ranking officer in the London Metropolitan Police.

Baroness James (for she has been so honoured for her services to literature) took the genre of crime fiction in new directions and to unaccustomed heights, giving her characters a three-dimensional presence, introducing significant subplots in her stories, and bringing to her work a style and substance that challenged, then destroyed forever, the artificial distinction between literary, or “serious” fiction and crime writing.

In today’s moral and literary climate, P. D. James is something of an anachronism, both for her understanding of the world and her treatment of matters criminal, which are grounded in a fetchingly-traditional civility and old-fashioned values such as telling the truth, keeping your word, and doing the right thing. Perhaps it is for that very reason that for many years she served as

a magistrate, or lay judge, in London’s criminal courts.



It is not surprising, then, that with all of her honours, P. D. James remains a person for whom duty and integrity are paramount. Over a number of years I have had the privilege of both speaking and corresponding with her. Even during the busy Christmas holidays, when there were many claims, domestic and professional, made upon her time, she managed to keep up our contact, discussing everything from her preferred reference source on forensic science to

the status of a cold-case investigated whilst she was with the Home Office. At one point she even put me in touch with her personal literary agent, although I was clearly out of my depth, and nothing came of it.

Today, at age eighty-seven, she is still going strong, having just released her seventeenth novel featuring Adam Dalgliesh, not counting two works of non-fiction, one her autobiography. Her latest is vintage James, containing all of the qualities that have over the decades made her the second-best-selling mystery novelist of all time (behind Agatha Christie, who, with an estimated two *billion* copies in print, did after all have a slight head start).

For her work P. D. James has received no less than seven honorary doctorates, an O.B.E., and a Life Peerage, making her a member of the British House of Lords. She is also a fellow of the Royal Societies of Literature and of Arts, and an Honourary Fellow of several colleges at both Oxford and Cambridge; and since 1997 she has held the post of President of the British-based Society of Authors (the first president, to put it into perspective, was Lord Tennyson). A partial list of her literary awards include the Mystery Writers of America's Best Novel Awards for 1971, 1973, and 1986, along with a Grandmaster Award for lifetime achievement in 1999. The British Crime Writers Association awarded her the Macallan Silver Dagger in 1971, 1975, and 1986, as well as the Cartier Diamond Dagger (also for lifetime achievement) in 1987.

And that, as they say, says it all.

The Private Patient

(A. A. Knopf/Random House, 2008)

London cosmetic surgeon George Chandler-Powell has a thriving practise amongst affluent clients seeking to improve their appearance or correct disfiguring injuries. When investigative journalist Rhoda Gradwyn approaches him to remove a prominent facial scar suffered at the hands of her abusive father when she was a child, he asks her why she waited thirty-four years to have the disfiguring scar removed. Her somewhat enigmatic reply: she had no further need for it. He agrees to treat her, and after arriving at Cheverall Manor, the surgeon's exclusive private clinic in Dorset, Rhoda undergoes the operation, only to be strangled that very night. Chief among the suspects are her narcissistic toy boy, whom she has recently told is in her will; he arrived at the clinic the day of the operation, and his greed is well-established.

But there is no shortage of other suspects. Chandler-Powell' has just jilted his long-time lover, the senior staff nurse; is she seeking revenge on the surgeon by discrediting his practise? The administrator of the Manor also harbours a grudge against the surgeon; and in her work as an investigative journalist Rhoda had antagonized many people who had no connection with Cheverall Manor. Finally, mysterious activity has been seen recently at an ancient stone circle on the grounds of the Manor. Is there a local cult at work?

At the top of her form

Although at her time of life P. D. James might be forgiven for dashing off a less-than-impressive story, anyone familiar with her body of work will realize that is simply not in her character. She remains

absolutely at the top of her form, and *The Private Patient* holds its own against any crime novel written today. It has all the ingredients of the classic puzzle mystery, including an isolated setting, a closed circle of suspects, each with compelling but different motives, and devilish misdirection, with no less than three twists in the tale. It is a delight to read, not least for its exquisitely disciplined use of the English language.

Like her other novels, *The Private Patient* also raises profound moral issues, grounded in the belief that our actions are important precisely because they have consequences. Perhaps reflecting her own dislike for loose ends James muses on mortality in her latest novel, when one of her characters says “*It’s a mistake to live until you greet each morning’s light, not with relief and certainly not with joy, but with disappointment and a regret that’s sometimes close to despair.*” One hopes that P.D. James has much time, pleasant time, before her.

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