

From out of the past, 1

Crime novelist recalls the Golden Age

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

These days books seem to be regarded almost as performance art: appearing on bookstore shelves for only a few months or even weeks, they are frequently then consigned to sales bins (the industry term is 'remaindered') to make way for more recently-published tomes. Alas, like the rest of us, authors seem to be limited to a paltry fifteen minutes of fame.

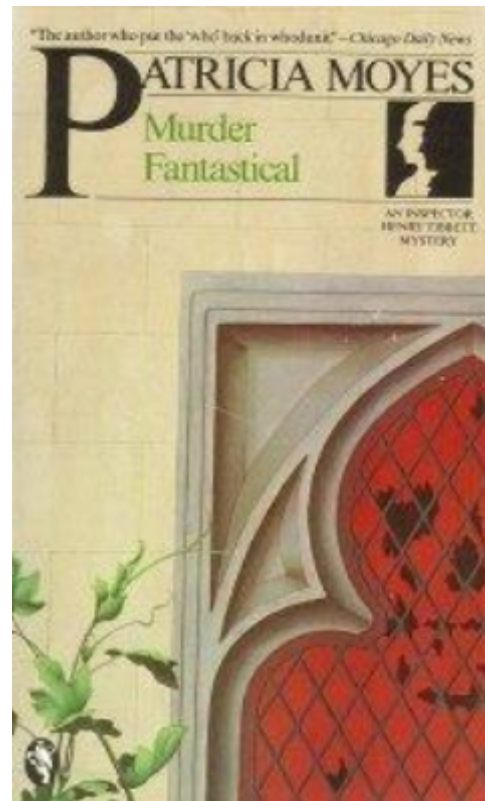
To help counteract this trend, in this column from time to time I will be highlighting crime novels that rise above the crowd, and seem destined to take their place in the pantheon of noteworthy writing. My pick this week is just such a novel.

After Christie, what?

By the mid-1970s fans of the traditional British cozy could be forgiven for being more than a little apprehensive: the genre was showing signs of becoming an endangered species. Dorothy L. Sayers had died in 1957 (and ceased writing her Lord Peter Wimsey tales almost twenty years earlier). Margery Allingham's final Albert Campion novel appeared in 1968 (two years after her death), and Agatha Christie had written her last Poirot adventure in 1975 (titled, ominously, *Curtain: Poirot's last case*), following that with her final Miss Marple tale (*Sleeping Murder*) a year later. Even more ominously, hard-boileds, already well-established in

America, were beginning to vie for space on the sales racks of British bookshops.

Not to worry, however. A second generation of British crime writers rooted firmly in the cozy tradition were emerging. One of the best of these was Patricia Moyes, who made a grand entrance (acknowledged approvingly by no less than Anthony Boucher) with a delightful debut novel titled *Dead Men Don't Ski* (1959). Although it is a fine story in its own right, My pick this week is a largely forgotten treasure, her 1967 novel, *Murder Fantastical*.



Patrica Moyes,
Murder Fantastical
(Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967)

A relative newcomer to the village of Cregwell, turf accountant Raymond Mason has driven over to Cregwell Grange to speak to George Manciple, the somewhat dottering scion of the family. Mason wants to buy Manciple's family estate, his admission ticket, as he sees it, to the life of a country squire.

Relations between the two have not always been cordial. Rebuffed in earlier efforts to buy the property, Mason has harassed Manciple with numerous official complaints, including the fact that Manciple has a shooting range on the estate which Mason argues is unsafe. As if to prove Mason's point, as he is leaving the grounds he is shot and killed, while Manciple is target-shooting nearby.

In the manner of English country-house crimes, the Chief Constable asks the help of Scotland Yard. Enter the amiable and deceptively-ordinary Henry Tibbett, Chief Inspector (later Chief Superintendent), accompanied, not entirely incongruously, by his wife Emily, who has a friend in the nearby village.

As Tibbett arrives at Cregwell Grange he is somewhat nonplussed to find an elderly man sitting in a nearby tree, pointing a pistol at him and hollering "Bang, bang!" It proves to be the lord of the manor (and presumed killer of the late Mr. Mason), attempting to recreate the circumstances of Mason's death. While this might seem to the casual reader to be a bit eccentric, even by English standards, it proves to be merely a harbinger of things to come. Before long Henry will meet Manciple's long-

suffering wife, Violet, his brother Edwin, the retired Bishop of Bugolaland, and Manciple's elderly aunt Dora. Each has their own quirky characteristic. Edwin has a passion for working crossword puzzles, coupled with random reminiscences of his time in the African outback; aunt Dora is going deaf, causing no little confusion in her conversational exchanges; and Violet spends much of her time trying to hold this loose-knit collection of lovable oddballs together.

Moreover, it seems to run in the family. George's father (who, being a former schoolmaster, is referred to by the family simply as the Head), died in a head-on collision with another driver. It seems he believed that as a taxpayer he had a right to drive down the middle of the road. Unfortunately, the same belief was shared by the oncoming driver.

Things get murky when the bookmaker's son arrives, claiming his father was murdered. A Marxist by inclination, he sees no irony in claiming his inheritance. Finally, there's young Julian Manning-Richards, fiancé to Violet's daughter Maud. It seems the late Raymond Mason fancied himself a contender for that honour, and the two were at odds. No shortage of suspects, then.

And so it goes. Before it is over Moyes will paint a quirky, endearing picture of English country life, at least as it existed in some circles, several decades ago. And if she occasionally goes a bit over the top, well, it's deliberate, and all in the service of a good cause. *Murder Fantastical* is an engaging tale about a quintessentially English family, with a traditional puzzle at its heart. It will not appeal to readers seeking realism, or gore, or conversational exchanges between what we understand today as

sane human beings. But it is, for all that, an affectionate and entertaining tale, and compares well with many cozies that find their way into print today.

***-A puzzle built on a comedy
of manners***

Although *Murder Fantastical* might be considered a spoof, or even a pastiche, it is not. It is, admittedly, something of a comedy of manners, documenting the eccentricities of a quintessentially English family, as well as being a fine puzzle tale. Moyes' oeuvre is firmly in the tradition of the reigning cozy writers of the preceding decades, and happily, although not currently in print, copies of *Murder Fantastical* are still readily available.

Born Patricia Pakenham-Walsh, Moyes worked for eight years with Peter Ustinov's film company, and wrote the screenplay for the film classic School for Scoundrels (featuring Terry Thomas, Ian Charmichael, and Alistair Sim). She also translated Jean Anouilh's play, Leocadia. Nominated for an Edgar in 1971, she died in the British Virgin Islands in 2000.

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