



## Death in Ecstasy: Inspector Roderick Alleyn #4

*Ngaio Marsh*

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Ahhh, prussic acid, that hallmark of classic Golden Age mysteries. Did lovely Cara Quoyne get a whiff of the bitter almonds as she raised the goblet to her lips? We'll never know: With a single sip she transported herself to the Hereafter. At least, that's the romantic view. But Inspector Roderick Alleyn has little interest in romance; he's investigating a murder. Cara was a deeply spiritual young woman, a novice with the House of the Sacred Flame. It seems, however, that somebody was operating from very un-spiritual motivations.

## **Death in Ecstasy: Inspector Roderick Alleyn #4 Details**

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## **From Reader Review Death in Ecstasy: Inspector Roderick Alleyn #4 for online ebook**

### **Adrian says**

Review to follow

And eventually it did follow. :)

I am enjoying this Inspector Alleyn mysteries challenge, although I am still 3 behind where I should be, oh bother.

The characterisations are good and the murders themselves are all so different, so every story is a breath of fresh air and fun (if murder can be fun ??). As with all the rest (well 3 so far) I have given 4 stars, a good read in my rating system, and I look forward to catching up with the rest of the group in the next couple of months (by which time another challenge will be falling by the wayside).

As anyone who reads my reviews ( is there anyone who reads my reviews ?) will know, I very rarely give away any of the plot, because if you want to know about the book, read the blurb on the back, but suffice to say that they never feel dated. So if you do read because you like Christie/Dexter/Sayers/Doyle then I'm guessing you will also enjoy this.

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### **Dillwynia Peter says**

Definitely not your usual drawing room English mystery- which is probably why I like Marsh.

I kept turning to two suspects, but could never work out the motive. One of my choices was correct, but Marsh doesn't give a motive either. Maybe it was greed?? It was the chief thing that I found disappointing. She writes a hilarious sentence describing who Agatha Christie & Dorothy L Sayers would have chosen as the culprit & why. In the mid 1930s, she obviously didn't take herself, nor the genre overly seriously.

I actually managed to get thru this one while very ill, so it is an easy read to most people.

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### **Bev says**

Death in Ecstasy (1936) by Ngaio Marsh finds Inspector Roderick Alleyn's some-time Watson, Nigel Strangeways, bored on a rainy, blustery London night. He gazes discontentedly out his window and notices a sign glinting in the light as the wind gusts and jostles it about: House of the Sacred Flame. A mysterious-sounding place and as he watches members of the obscure sect enter the sacred portals, he decides that attending the services of a strange religious group is just what he needs to liven up a dull evening. Who knows--there might even be a story in it. Little does he suspect just how much news he's going to find behind the doors.

This particular Sunday night was a special one--a monthly service in which The Chosen Vessel, in this case

one Miss Cara Quayne, having been prepared through a month of preparatory sessions with Father Garnette--the founder, reaches a state of Ecstasy through ceremony. Bathgate watches as a sacred chalice is passed among the faithful. There's a bit of chanting, Cara drinks from the cup, and falls down at the feet of the priest.

My friends...My friends, our beloved sister has been vouchsafed the greatest boon of all. She is in ecstasy. Let us sing our hymn to Pan, the God-in-all.

But--as one of the Initiates points out...

It's not. It's not. She's dead. I touched her. She's dead!

Dr. Kasbek, a member of the congregation comes forward and confirms the Initiate's declaration. They are about to clear the House when Nigel suggests that no one should leave just yet and perhaps the police should be called. After all--the woman's mouth and eyes look a bit odd and there's a certain smell. The doctor investigates further and agrees with Nigel that it looks very like poison. The newsman uses the phone to call in his old friend Inspector Alleyn.

Alleyn walks into a place of mystery that is nonetheless full of very familiar worldly motives for murder--greed, jealousy, and lust to name a few. There are seven suspects all with reasons to want the lovely Cara dead--from those who were jealous of her chosen position with Father Garnette to those with a taste for the "special cigarettes" that light the way to ecstasy to those who were greedy for her wealth...either for themselves or to fill the coffers of the Sacred Flame. It's up to Alleyn with the help of Inspector Fox and Nigel to sift the clues and find those that point to the murderer.

Marsh does atmosphere very well in this one. Her theatrical background lends itself to creating the slightly over-the-top trappings of the Sacred Flame. A cult that embraces all the gods of everywhere and every time and the sacred words and chants of them all. And she presents it without it seeming like the incredible mishmash that it is. Alleyn may raise his eyebrows at it, but while the ceremony is in progress, even the worldly journalist Bathgate is swept up in the moment and lulled by the words of the priest. It's easy to see how the Initiates could be wrapped up in the cult.

Well-written with skillful plotting, though not quite as mystifying as her previous work.

First posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

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### **Jan C says**

This one was a slow starter for me. But it did pick up. And I wound up enjoying it.

Here Alleyn's reporter friend, Nigel Bathgate, discovers that he is living across the street from a cult-type church. They won't let him in the first time - he was too late. So the next time he makes a point of being early. A suspicious death takes place and he calls in Alleyn.

It was interesting. I was stumped.

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## **Carol. says**

Forget comparisons to Christie. But consider instead Marsh's similarity to Janet Evanovitch, or to Oscar Wilde as Detective Alleyn questions a suspect:

**"'No worries over money?'**

**'Money? No. She was what the world calls rich.'**

**'What do you call it, sir?'**

**Father Garnette gave a frank and dreadfully boyish laugh. '**

**Why, I should call it rich too, Inspector,' he cried gaily.**

**'An unhappy love affair, do you know?" pursued Alleyn.**

**Father Garnette did not answer for a moment. Then he said sadly, "Ah, Inspector Alleyn, we speak in different languages.'**

**'I didn't realize that, said Alleyn. "Can you translate my question into your own language or would you rather not answer it?"**

I admit, I might have rolled my eyes a bit at the beginning, a ceremony by an oddball cult, infiltrated by Nigel the journalist. But once I was over the patently obvious setup, it was entertaining, particularly if one keeps in mind the original publication date of 1936.

**"If it is murder,' he said quietly, 'and the trail's not just all that easy and—aw hell, Chief, I've got the dollars and I ain't paralyzed yet."**

**With which cryptic remark Mr. Ogden took himself off.'**

**Is he real?' asked Nigel, 'or is he a murderer with unbridled histrionic ambitions? Surely no American was ever so American. Surely—'**

**'Do stop making these exclamatory interjections. You behave for all the world like a journalistic Greek chorus.'"**

The detection techniques are bogglingly inappropriate, but honestly, I felt it made it clear it's intended to be a farce. A lot like Stephanie Plum, you can't possibly take most of Alleyn's techniques seriously, although in this book we are finally seeing 'modern' police techniques like looking for fingerprints and searching for forensic evidence (incidentally, there are also jokes about the 'gentlemanly breed' of police detectives).

I think there are some homophobic undertones regarding a pair of initiates into the cult, but I think most of the implied slurs went over my head. There is also, perhaps surprising to some, quite a bit of drug use, although none of it glamorous.

Overall, the mystery was a little bit silly, but the process of getting there was fun. I'll undoubtedly go on to the next.

Three-and-a-half-stars, rounding up

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## **Lemar says**

Ngaio Marsh writes with wit and assurance. Death in Ecstasy centers around a cultish house of worship of which she dryly and accurately observes, "The phoenix of quackery arises again and again from its own

ashes. Tonight we slam the door on this bit of hocus-pocus and tomorrow someone else starts a new sideshow for the credulous ." Sadly true.

This mystery came out in 1936 and already she observes what is true today (2016) that young people, "take refuge in irony, a commodity that should be reserved for the middle-aged." As always, the characters are well drawn and the banter delightful while noting at one point the necessity faced by compassionate investigators to include a sense of humor in their otherwise grim jobs.

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## Dfordoom says

*Death in Ecstasy* was the fourth of Ngaio Marsh's Detective Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn mysteries, appearing in 1936. The story is set against a background of a rather dubious religious cult.

Journalist Nigel Bathgate is bored, bored and curious. That's what drives him to the House of the Sacred Flame. This religious cult combines a bit of everything, from Christianity to Norse paganism to eastern mysticism. It attracts the bored and the wealthy, the cynical opportunists and the gullible.

It attracted Cara Quayne, who mysteriously drops dead during one of their ceremonies. Nigel Bathgate knows enough about crime to immediately suspect poison, and he makes a quick phone call to his old friend Detective Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard. Even with the overwhelming odour of incense pervading the temple the characteristic bitter almonds smell of cyanide is hard to miss. And no other poison could have killed its victim so quickly.

Alleyn is not exactly thrilled to find himself saddled with such a case. His distaste for cults is strong and instinctive. Nonetheless he is on the spot within minutes - at least he has the advantage of being called in when the trail is well and truly warm.

The House of the Sacred Flame cult is run by the Reverend Jasper Garnette, and it's a nice little earner. Several wealthy people have put large sums of money into the cult, including both the deceased and American businessman Samuel J. Ogden. A Frenchman named Raoul de Ravigne, who was once wealthy but suffered considerably from the stock market, also invested a lesser but still not inconsiderable sum.

There are seven Initiates in the cult. Apart from the deceased, de Ravigne and Ogden there are also a Mrs Candour, a Miss Wade, a nervous young woman named Maurice Pringle and his fiancée, Janey Jenkins. They all took part in the fatal ceremony, and are therefore all suspects. As is the officiating priest, the aforementioned Reverend Jasper Garnette, and his Acolytes, two rather fey young men named Claude and Lionel, and a medical practitioner, Doctor Kasbek, who was on the scene within seconds of Cara Quayne's death. Miss Quayne's old nurse, who was bitterly opposed to Cara's membership of this cult, is yet another suspect as she was present as well although her presence was unknown to any of the participants.

So there is an embarrassment of suspects. There is also an embarrassment of motives. This is because the cult was in fact a seething cauldron of repressed sexuality, jealousy and greed. And Alleyn doesn't take long to notice that Maurice Pringle displays all the symptoms of narcotics abuse. He is a heroin addict, and he is not the only member of the cult who indulges in this vice. No wonder Roderick Alleyn finds this case distasteful.

Ngaio Marsh's plotting is as skillful as you'd expect from a woman who was one of the big guns in golden age detective fiction. Her style is often tongue-in-cheek and includes the sort of self-referential touches that

annoy some readers - halfway through the book one character makes the observation that if this was a detective novel it would be roughly at the halfway point. If you can ignore this sort of thing then her witty style has much to recommend it.

Roderick Alleyn would be in the well-established tradition of gentlemen detectives but for one thing - he is a working policeman rather than an amateur of crime.

Death in Ecstasy is highly entertaining and the cult background adds a good deal of fun. Recommended.

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### **Miriam says**

Having a mystery in a series involve a weird religious group or cult isn't as de rigueur as having one with a house party or one with a theatrical performance, but it is pretty common. Instant color! This particular sect is pretty odd, and Marsh never really explains why, since they made the religion up only two years ago, they picked such an odd syncretism. But it doesn't seem to matter much.

Amusing if you can manage to ignore the overt and recurring (and completely irrelevant to the plot) homophobia. Silver lining, fruity friends: you will automatically be dismissed from suspicion of murder because you "wouldn't have the guts".

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### **FangirlNation says**

Nigel Bathgate finds himself bored one rainy Sunday night and crosses his street to the House of the Sacred Flame, a strange cult that has recently moved in near him in Ngaio Marsh's Death in Ecstasy. Talking his way past the locked doors, Nigel gets introduced to a hypnotic preacher, Father Garnet, who is full of talk of ecstasy, only stirring at the end in time to watch the passing of the sacred vessel among the initiates. Then, it gets handed to the newest initiate, Cara Quayne, who drinks and enters ecstasy, according to Father Garnet, but in reality she dies. Nigel stops the religious leader from dispersing the congregation and insists on calling Chief Detective Inspector Roddick Alleyn, who brings his team to investigate the murder.

Read the rest of this review and other fun, geeky articles at Fangirl Nation

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### **Nikki says**

Well, I guess I'd better give up the disclaimer about what I think of these. They're harmless, easy fun, concerned with setting up a puzzle and then working it out, with lots of red herrings and interesting people along the way. Nothing ground breaking, but comfortable.

This one did give me a little bit of unease because of the swishy, blatantly queer couple who were a walking, talking pair of stereotypes. At least they were harmless, but Marsh wrote about them rather unpleasantly and nobody thought any good of them. At least Alleyn, as I imagine him, wouldn't be an ass to them in person about it, but would respect their relationship (as long as he thought it was real, not just theatrics and melodrama). I suppose I am getting to like him, though I think I'm building on him in my own mind more than Marsh is in the text.

This one only slightly breaks the trend -- there's no reconstruction, though the group do gather together again to talk it over, which is pretty close.

The statement I spotted in another review that Nigel Bathgate does nothing and could he please be murdered now is sadly accurate. The one point I liked was when Alleyn rings up and tells him to act as if he's talking to Angela. That was a bit amusing.

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### **Victoria says**

Ngaio Marsh, where have you been all my life? I had read Agatha Christie over the years, but never Marsh. I love the sense of humor and wry wit, the handling of the characters. The setting in the 1930s era of wacky cults and pseudo religions was a lot of fun. I've seen other writers touch on the subject, but Marsh is so playful with it and yet adds insight as to why someone would join up with one of these groups. Well written and fun. I'm definitely going to check out the library for more Marsh!

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### **Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says**

A wealthy young woman dies of cyanide poisoning in the midst of a faux-communion ceremony. She was the newly Chosen Vessel--but chosen for what, exactly? Seven suspects in search of a motive--jealousy, hatred, or just plain money? Drugs, sex and neopaganism made for a very fast read; the best of the Alleyn series to date. Written in 1936, when table-turning, tarot and all sorts of paganism were enjoying a comeback...rather like today, though if Marsh had been a modern mystery author, instead of being neopagan, the "church" probably would have been on the Evangelical lunatic fringe. Fortunately she has no real axe to grind with religion, so it's just the murder story.

I must admit that when I saw the cast of characters in the front I thought, oh dear--that usually means it's going to be hard to remember who is who. Then there's mention of someone drawing a map of the inside of the "temple", but fortunately said map is not reproduced or even mentioned much. (If I ever find a book with both a cast-list *and* a map of where it happened, I'll know it's an impossible read.) But perhaps said list was just a publisher's convention, as so far they tend to abound in Marsh's books.

My only complaint is that on p112 of 208 in my edition, Bathgate makes the obligatory comparison between "real life" and detective novels a bit blatant: *"Look here, let's pretend it's a detective novel. Where would we be by this time? About halfway through I should think."* And of course we are about halfway through. **Why** did golden-age mystery writers think this lent authenticity? That and Alleyne's penchant for referring to Inspector Fox as "Foxkin"; A. admits he tries too hard to amuse, and sometimes it shows. Wimsey you ain't, sir, even as Wimsey and Christie and Inspector French get a mention.

I did chuckle when they visited the service flat with all mod cons, including "Fyrexo" tempered kitchenware. Pyrex was invented in 1915, according to Google, so it was the latest thing.

A pleasant enough popcorn read with fewer twists and turns and obfuscations than I expected.

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## **Susan says**

This is the fourth Inspector Alleyn novel and was published in 1936. Again, we have the input of Alleyn's young friend, journalist Nigel Bathgate, who spies people arriving at a nearby building from his apartment. His interest piqued, he ventures out, on the wet and windy evening, and discovers the House of the Sacred Flame, an unorthodox religious group. Intrigued, he gains entrance, and witnesses a religious rite going on inside – with the group crying out the names of pagan gods and passing round a chalice of wine. Unfortunately, the chalice contains something a little more potent and, poisoned, the 'Chosen Vessel,' a woman named Cara Quayne, falls to her death, witnessed by Nigel, who immediately calls Alleyn.

This is an unusual setting and an odd cast of suspects. Involved are Jasper Garnette, the officiating priest of the House of the Sacred Flame, plus various initiates. Despite the setting, there are very familiar motives though, including greed and jealousy, as well as the use of drugs and resentment at members handing over their wealth to this group. In a way, this is a little like an early novel about a cult.

Some of the characters are quite stereotypical and may offend modern sensibilities, but I find it difficult to expect political correctness of novels written in the past. Still, there is certainly a fair amount of scorn poured on two young, rather effeminate, acolytes which will jar modern readers. That said, this is an enjoyable mystery. Not perhaps as good as the previous novel in the series, "The Nursing Home Mystery," but I look forward to reading on.

Rated 3.5

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## **Bill Kerwin says**

Ngaio Marsh's style is always a pleasure, but this tale of mystic rites in a threadbare temple in middle class London is a bit antiquated (even for its time), and the characters--often a Marsh strong point--are rather stereotypical, particularly the American businessman and the two gay "acolytes." Also, the solution to the mystery really wasn't much of a surprise.

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## **Anna says**

" 'I receive facts,' said Alleyn, 'as a spider does flies.' "

"People do run true to type. It's an axiom of police investigation."

world-weary

" 'Look here,' said Nigel suddenly, 'let's pretend it's a detective novel. ... Well, who's your pick.' 'I am invariably gulled by detective novels. No herring so red but I raise my voice and give chase.' 'Don't be ridiculous,' said Nigel.  
'Fact. You see, in real detection herrings are so often out of season.'  
'Well, never mind, who's your pick?'

'It depends on the author. If it's Agatha Christie, Miss Wade's occulted guilt drips from every page. Dorothy Sayer's Lord Peter would plump for Pringle ; I fancy. Inspector French would go for Ogden.' ...  
'I suspect the whole lot of them. ...'

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