



# A Most Contagious Game

*Catherine Aird*

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## A Most Contagious Game Catherine Aird

When a London businessman retires early and buys a Tudor mansion, he's quite surprised--and perhaps even a little pleased (retirement being pretty boring)--to find a skeleton hidden in a secret room in the house. The skeleton appears to be more than a 150 years old, so the local police leave it to the homeowner to solve the mystery. The police are much more interested in solving a local, modern murder. Somehow the two deaths are connected. First published in 1967, this is Aird's only non-Inspector Sloan mystery and a complete triumph.

## A Most Contagious Game Details

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Author : Catherine Aird

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# From Reader Review A Most Contagious Game for online ebook

## Robert Palmer says

After a heart attract Thomas Harding & his wife retire to the country in an old manor house. He discovers a secret room that contains a body about 15 years of age.

The room is a priest hole from the time of Elizabeth 1 . This was not a good time ( mid 1500s to early 1600s) to be Cathlic in England. Harding sets out who the boy was & why he was murdered & hid in the Priest hole. At the same the local police are searching for Alan Fenny for the murder of his wife. Harding gets evolved in that also. The question is, are the two murders 150 years apart connected.

This is the only mystery written by Aird that is a part of her series of inspector Slone & constable Crosby . It is one of her best.

If you like mysteries I would recommend this

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## Particle\_Person says

This book is very similar to Josephine Tey's "Daughter of Time." A wealthy man is recovering from a heart attack in his new (to him) but otherwise extremely old house. He discovers a skeleton in a priest's hole, and slowly researches how it ended up there. I've gone and made it sound all dry, but really it's not — Aird did a brilliant job at atmosphere in this book. She slowly generates tension and makes the historical characters alive as we learn about them. If your favorite part of a traditional ghost story is the inevitable trip to the library, you should read this.

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## Jenn Estepp says

Pretty sure that this was a goodreads recommendation and, based on this and a few others, I should start paying more attention to what the algorithms say. Very entertaining mystery, mixing the modern (well, 1967, when it was published).

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## Cornerofmadness says

This mystery was first published the year I was born, 1967 so it definitely an old fashioned type mystery, not much in the way of forensics. It is Ms Aird's only stand alone mystery (all the others were in one detective series). I picked up the reprint because I had wanted to revisit some older mysteries this year.

Thomas and his wife, Dora, have moved from London to the countryside to live in a Tudor manor house. Thomas was a very successful businessman but a heart attack ended his career and he is very much the invalid, resting much of the day in his house and hating it. He has a few wants: to be able to do more physically and to leave some of his largesse to his new home, much like the former owners, the Barons Barbary who have their names attached to just about everything in the village from the 1500's up to the

1800's when the family emigrated to America mysteriously and gave up the land.

The story opens with Thomas and Gladys, the housekeeper (and frankly the only female character with a whisper of personality and not much at that), wondering why Charlie Ford put the electrical plug in such a weird spot. It quickly comes to light that the plaster happens to be over very old wood. Once that is taken down, the wood is revealed and with it a hidden priest hole, built at sometime in the 1500's to hide Jesuits from the pursivants who would have tortured and killed them in the name of the Queen.

Startling them all, there is a skeleton in the priest hole, a 15 year old boy with his skull crushed. When the police won't really investigate it, Thomas takes it on his own head to try and find the identity of the young boy and why he might have been killed. The police have their hands full with a fresh murder, Mrs. Mary Fenny has been strangled to death and the police think it was her husband, Alan, to blame. Alan is missing and the townspeople, believing him innocent, are protecting him. Thomas is oddly angry that the police are more interested in that than in his case which made no sense to me especially after they prove the boy has been dead between 100-200 years ago.

It doesn't take long for him to go through gravestones, church records and historical society data to find out that the boy is most likely Toby Barbary, who should have inherited the baronetcy in Napoleon's day but disappeared in a fishing accident. But just who killed him and why, is a puzzle Thomas needs to work on. As for the investigation of Mary Fenny's death, about the only thing we see happening is the police poking into people's homes and lamenting no one will talk to them. That, and Alan's mother purposely crossing paths with Thomas to taunt him with the fact her son is innocent and he'd see soon enough (though I'm not sure why he should care).

On the whole, it's a nice slow mystery. With the events a century in the past, there is of course no sense of immediate danger (except maybe from Thomas's heart). That part of the mystery was entertaining. However, this wasn't without its faults.

Mary Fenny's mystery is solved deus ex machine and well, frankly illegally and almost as an afterthought. None of the female characters have a personality. Dora exists only to remind us Thomas is unwell. Seriously. And for that matter, Thomas obviously doesn't like women at all. He is superior and patronizing in the extreme, even for a 1960's man. (more like the 50's or before. I've seen more enlightened Victorians). Multiple times he dismisses things Dora thinks as irrelevant and the one passage that stuck with me was 'He could think of many reasons to strangle a blonde woman but none for killing a fifteen year old boy.' Wow, says it all about him, doesn't it?

And the way the reprinters over-sold the introduction. Don't get me wrong. I applaud them for bringing us these older mysteries, long out of print. I like being able to see them again (even knowing misogyny might be in them). However, to tout this as the 'perfect mystery' and to reference customers who agree is a bit much. Perfect mysteries don't ignore half the mystery going on for one. If I had read the intro first I think I would have been terribly disappointed. It's a decent mystery but far from perfect.

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**Stacy says**

A Most Contagious Game has so many things that I enjoy in a mystery - it's set in an English village, there is a hidden room, and fun characters. This is a stand alone book by the author of the Inspector Sloan series. It being a stand alone book is my only complaint. I really enjoyed spending time with these characters and want to learn more about what happened to them.

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### **Cindy says**

"The Most Contagious Game" is a stand alone novel by Catherine Aird. It follows a retired man who finds a skeleton while trying to have his home rewired. It seems the skeleton is about 150 years old, and so the police don't care who the murderer is, but our hero, Tom does. Soon, he is able to piece together the motive for the killing, and so discovers the killer. In the meantime, the police are trying to solve a modern murder, with the suspect in hiding. The two mysteries entwine, and so our hero helps to solve two crimes. Good book, with solid information about priest holes, and such.

CMB

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### **Michelle says**

Serendipity is what brought me to this book - walked past the university book exchange today and stumbled upon it. Brought it back, and a couple of hours later, I'm done. If not for this, I am 100% sure I would never ever have heard of this author or read this book, and now I want to read more!

The story is set in a quiet English village, its unlikely protagonist a retired City banker who's had a heart attack and been consigned to the country to recuperate. Investigating a mystery of the electric system in the ancient manor he's bought, he discovers one day a "priest's hole" - a small space in which to hide a priest when Catholics were being persecuted in England. In it lies a skeleton of a boy, dead almost 200 years. Since the police don't care to investigate, he sets out to do so himself, and brings the reader along on the ride.

What I really enjoyed about this book was that I felt like I was getting all the clues and could contribute in figuring out what was going on. There were a couple of elements that seemed unnecessary and plucked out of nowhere, but overall the plot was really skilfully woven and all the reasoning logical - nothing truly genius about it, but good old-fashioned puzzling out a mystery.

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### **Nancy Oakes says**

nonseries

In its own way, A Most Contagious Game reminded me a bit of Josephine Tey's Daughter of Time. Both have elements of historical fiction, and both involve the solving of murders from the past. Tey's hero thinks he has solved the mystery of who really killed the princes in the tower (viz Richard III); the hero in Aird's

book comes upon a skeleton in a priest's hole he discovers in his home. After being told that the skeleton is probably about 150 years old, the main character sets about using history to try to figure out who the bones belonged to and why he or she was in there. Aside from that, though, the two books go on divergent paths, with this one adding in a present-day murder as well.

I thought this book was awesome until the very end, because when the murderer (present-day) is revealed, it is so quick and so fast that you're thinking to yourself "huh?" No lead in at all. I have noted in some of my reviews of her other books that the author has a habit of doing this and I'm sad to see she continued it here.

If I could give like 3.75 stars, that's what I'd do; but I must say I really liked the book up until that point. Others may disagree. Oh well.

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### **Elizabeth says**

This was a wonderful book! A true cozy, complete with hidden rooms, spooky sounds and happenings and a superb cast of characters. This may have been the author's third book, but it isn't the third Inspector Sloan installation. Rather, it is a stand alone story. It also has the makings of a wonderful who-dunnit cozy mystery. It flowed easily, the characters were well rounded and the plot well explained at each stage of a discovery.

This book has become one of my top 3 favorite cozys and I have no doubt that I will read and enjoy it many times over.

Brava, Ms. Aird, brava for this highly recommended book.

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### **ben says**

2 1/2 stars, this was a struggle for the first 120 pages or so, then everything happened extremely rapidly and the conclusion was a bit underwhelming in addition to a lot of easy guesswork for some of the mystery.

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### **CLM says**

This is a huge favorite in my family, resulting from our devotion (literally) to Edmund Campion and Nicholas Owen (my nephew is named after him) and is generally considered to be Aird's best book as well as a classic mystery. Happily, it is back in print.

The story begins with a retired couple, the Hardings, buying a house "to get away from it all" in, and soon they learn that their home has a secret reaching back to the 16th century. In contrast to a secret from the past, which is one of Aird's specialties, are her two sometimes humorous and always entertaining detectives, recurring characters in each of her books. One is Inspector C.D. Sloane of the Calleshire police department and one is his sidekick, the clueless Constable Crosby. They always turn up to solve the mystery and save the day.

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## **Linda Rowland says**

Plucked this from shelf in my shop. Not sure where it came from but did enjoy it. Older British mystery. Knocked a star for odd interpretation of U.S.  
Do we all drawl to the British ear?  
Do they understand that we do not use titles?

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## **Linda says**

I do enjoy the style of British mysteries. I think I find them comforting. This solves a 150 year old murder of a teenage boy and new murder of a young married woman. Thomas and Dora Harding retire to Manor House of Easterbrook because of his heart health. Even though I'm not normally a history person the way it was presented in this book worked for me. Interesting right up until the last page.

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## **Kat says**

Lovely British village mystery, old style. Reminiscent of the Daughter of Time.

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## **Hannah says**

### **Rating Clarification: 4.5 Stars**

Fans of Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* would probably enjoy this stand-alone novel from Aird. Both novels feature a semi-invalid protagonist who spends his time solving the mystery through research, deduction and (yes, it must be said) conveniently available clues.

As to the mystery involved, there were actually 2 running concurrently: one murder from the past and a current murder from the area. The mystery from the past was my favorite, and involved a 50+ high powered London businessman who was forced by a heart condition to retire and take it easy. Thomas Harding finds retirement anything but retiring, and wonders if he and his wife Dora did the right thing in spending all his hard earned cash on a Tudor mansion in the sleepy village of Calleford. It's not long before the need for a plug-in socket reveals a mysterious skeleton inhabiting a hidden priest hole, and Thomas finds his *raison d'être*. It's a fun romp, and Aird provides subtle and sly wit to his characters and a good historical sleuthing adventure for Thomas and the reader. The current murder isn't as successfully developed or concluded IMO. I would have liked to have known a bit more about the leading suspects and the victim then I ended up getting, and the resolution was a bit far-fetched. However, I liked how both the past and present murders intersected in some places, and I was completely surprised by whodunnit - but then again I usually am!

The thing I personally enjoyed about this book was the way Aird wove real historical content and people into her mystery. In this case, I learned all about an Elizabethan Jesuit lay brother/carpenter named Nicolas Owen. Know who he is? Well, quite a few of the priest holes found in Tudor homes (and probably many that are *still* undiscovered) have been attributed to Owen, who in his time was nicknamed "God's Carpenter".

Owen, a devout Catholic, made it possible for priests to hide away when suspect homes were searched for evidence of Catholic "idolatry" during the reign of Elizabeth I. Owen was later captured, tortured, martyred and canonized by the Church. He revealed absolutely nothing to his captors. The idea of hidden places and getting "one over" on authority really appeals to me, and Aird did a wonderful job of marrying history with fiction in this story. Who can resist a Tudor mansion containing a skeleton in a hidden priest hole? Sign me up!

A very entertaining and easy read (clocking in at 159 pages). I will certainly be on the lookout for more by Aird.

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