



Unnatural Death

Dorothy L. Sayers

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The wealthy old woman was dead – a trifle sooner than expected. The intricate trail of horror and senseless murder led from a beautiful Hampshire village to a fashionable London flat and a deliberate test of "amour" – staged by the debonair sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey. Here the modern detective story begins to come to its own; and all the historical importance aside, it remains an absorbing and charming story today.

Unnatural Death Details

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From Reader Review Unnatural Death for online ebook

Susan says

This is the third Lord Peter Wimsey novel. Wimsey and Charles Parker are interrupted, while in a teashop, by a doctor who overhears them talking about crime. He relates a tale of how he was treating an elderly lady for cancer, whose niece insisted was much nearer than death than he felt she was. When she died suddenly, without leaving a will, the doctor insisted on an autopsy, leading to bad feeling with both the niece, Miss Whittaker, and the local community. Indeed, his actions led to him having to leave the area and begin work elsewhere. Of course, Lord Peter is immediately intrigued - how many people do 'get away with murder'? However, Parker is not convinced there is a case to answer. Presumably, as an officer of the law he had enough real work to be getting on with, but Wimsey is determined to investigate.

In this entertaining novel, Lord Peter uses the indefatigable Miss Climpson as his "ears and tongue and especially nose." A spinsterish lady, much in the style of a slightly younger Miss Marple, she is an enquiry agent for Lord Peter; settling herself into a boarding house near where the elderly lady died and sending letters (which you feel the author had great fun writing) reporting on the people and places involved. Before long there is a further murder and even Parker is convinced that something is amiss. Did Miss Whittaker hurry her aunt along to make sure she inherited? Who is the mysterious Mrs Forrest? Is Lord Peter Wimsey himself going to become a victim?

This is a real puzzle of a mystery, with endless clues and suspects and sometimes you do feel a little bogged down in information. However, the real fun and sense of righting a wrong does shine through and you happily embark on the journey with Lord Peter, Parker, Miss Climpson and, of course, Bunter. Very enjoyable, brilliantly plotted (if a little confusingly at times) and, of course, much of the pleasure is in the character of Lord Peter Wimsey himself. If you enjoy Golden Age detective fiction then you will love this.

Carol ?? says

3.5★

It would be nice when reading a new, favourite author if there was a steady arc of improvement, but I don't like this one quite as much as I liked *Clouds of Witness*. I still enjoyed it, but there were places where the story became quite bogged down and Sayers had characters voicing their disapproval of both blacks & Roman Catholics. My usual disclaimer; I still prefer to read uncensored.

I think Sayers was probably struggling a bit with censorship herself - it was obvious that two of the characters were (view spoiler)

I guessed the main twist well before the end, but this was still a satisfying read & I hope to tackle another Sayers before the end of the year.

Nikki says

Starting the New Year with a Sayers review? Yes, please.

So *Unnatural Death* is maybe not the best in terms of the convoluted plot, the number of characters, etc, because it's not one of the most personal stories for Lord Peter. On the other hand, you do get to see Peter again treating it a little like a hobby, a curiosity, and then having to face the consequences of his ego. And there's a lot of Miss Climpson, too; not as much as one of the later books, but enough to show that she's a really great character — her letters with their underlinings and italicising are hilarious.

The murder method is pretty good for this one, though, really: I wouldn't guess it if I wasn't familiar with an NCIS episode where there are a couple of killings done the same way, and yet it's simple and obvious once you know what it is.

So not my favourite, but it does work and come together beautifully.

Jeanette says

One of the earliest of the series that I'm going back to read. And this one is excellent. It seems to introduce Miss Climpson too- who is a spinster that works undercover for Lord Peter in her travels and visitations rift with gossip gathering gems of information. Something that a high class Lord by his very presence and manner would not successfully approach. I love how Lord Peter continually rolls with the punches of the social order and locale or associated "conditions" to finding out what HE wants to know.

Sayers is honed here in her conversational tidbits and dialect diatribes. Usually between groups of church women or female servants. It's melodic.

The case prime premise is essentially core to being a standard central original. I knew how they died because I believe this crux has been used dozens of times AFTER Sayers' era of writing. She's the prime literary source, possibly, for this "method". (Poisons have been SO overdone.) Among other unique and original features of hers, hardly ever given the credit, IMHO! Agatha is colder, trickier and more devious in the tellings, but I do think that Sayers is far more inventive, actually. Although their styles are so different, I can absolutely understand how Christie became the standard. Sayers is too unique and high brow of tones and of wit to be as universally admired. But I think in some nuance and critical thinking skill displays, she might be better than Christie.

In this one we have some tricky moves that don't become apparent until 30 pages from the ending. Unlike some Sayers of Lord Wimsey, this one is not at all overlong. And he has not meet Harriet yet, nor is he at all embedded within great detail of Lord Denver or other family members. This one is Det. Parker and himself with his "new" help. Bunter is not even centrally involved.

I found the entire believable and an excellent and entertaining read. And the Vicar very much like the dozens of priests and brothers I have known. A miracle!

I'll definitely read them all. Top rung entertainment and all kinds of serendipity knowledge displayed!

Lastly, all of these books (my copies of various date publications but nearly all were the hardcovers)- have delightful letters or some business correspondence or some other 2 page essential prize gem at the beginning or the ending. It will "catch you up" or give essential past or family mood nuance - or plant the emotive

specifics for a death or an inheritance or something. I LOVE IT.

This one has an entire genealogical chart of 2 page width at the ending- which gives you the 250 year or so family branch ancestor history for the "old lady" victim. (I laughed out loud for the terms of "old" people in this book- twice.) This ancient is 73.

Also a short aside warning to those of you who are highly politically correct social warriors. This is a book of its era-the earliest quarter of the 20th century. The language and standards names used for other humans beyond the UK's high classes for other groups or visual conditions is quadruple XXXX. Do not judge these present day (language bombs now) of Sayers or Lord Wimsey's time by those of your own time. Please.

Ruth says

For years I've been convinced that I much prefer the Lord Peter Wimsey books after Harriet Vane makes an appearance, but this book changed my mind. I always picture Lord Peter as an empty-headed fop in pre-Harriet days but I've had to revise my opinion as he came across as sensitive and conscientious rather than just a rich man of leisure with too much time on his hands

The character of Miss Climpson shines throughout the book for me and her situation made me think about the limited possibilities open to spinsters in the 1920s. Miss Climpson certainly rises to the challenge (this last to be said in capital letters with many exclamation marks).

Jason Koivu says

The continuing adventures of that dandy Lord Peter Wimsey continue.

In *Unnatural Death*, our somewhat foppish hero, the amateur detective Wimsey suspects there may be more to the cancer-assumed death of an older lady. But what are the means? What is the motive?

I've read about five of Sayer's Wimsey books so far and this is the least engaging. There's nothing blatantly wrong with it, it's just not quite up to standard. I struggled to get a grasp on why I felt this way. I think it's because there's very little action and a whole lot of talking, specifically between Wimsey and his friend Inspector Parker. They spend a good deal of time sitting about talking this one over. They literally don't move. Yes, of course there is SOME action somewhere within the book: a bit of dash at the end; a touch of insinuated violence. But most of this seemed to me to be Wimsey spouting his theories with Parker pooping them.

However, *Unnatural Death* contains all the humor and old world panache (as well as old world borderline racism) one comes to expect from these books, and any fan of the Wimsey stories will enjoy this one regardless of its minor failings.

mark monday says

the further adventures of the inimitable mervyn bunter, prince of manservants, master of the perfectly correct response and the carefully disguised critique, expert at pretty much everything. all that plus he had to deal with dressing annoying lord peter wimsey every morning. surely the man must have been a virgo.

Jane says

Where I got the book: My bookshelf. A re-read.

Well I've already failed in my attempt to re-read the Wimsey books in order, because I always thought *Clouds of Witness* came AFTER *Unnatural Death*. Wimsey seems younger in the latter, somehow.

The Wimsey books, in general, are superb examples of Golden Age detective fiction: intricate plots which give you all the clues on the page and yet count on misdirection to keep you guessing. The plot of *Unnatural Death* seems to arise from a question: do doctors ever suspect wrongdoing around their patients' deaths? Wimsey meets such a doctor by chance, and sets about investigating the slightly premature decease of an old lady who refused to make her will.

There are three interesting points I'd like to note about this book. First, the initial signs of Wimsey's transformation into the godlike figure of the later books are there, notably in the hints about his vast experience of women and skill as a lover. Not to mention his ability to climb drainpipes and locate a body in a large expanse of countryside.

Second, we see the hammering home of a theme Sayers weaves through the Wimsey novels: what right does Wimsey have to go around detecting given that his interfering inevitably seems to result in more deaths? I love the way Sayers makes her detective think about the internal logic of detective novels.

Third, Sayers gets to tackle the topic of LESBIANS without actually being able to clarify that point to the reader, since the book was written in the 1920s and homosexuality could only be hinted at in the broadest manner. It always makes me laugh that the main "proof" of the villain's same-sex preference is that she doesn't fancy Wimsey. Nice to be so irresistible.

Black marks on this book, always quoted by Sayers' critics, are her casual use of racially offensive terms; but the reader needs to remember that this kind of speech was the norm in her day, and if anything she shows greater sympathy toward non-Christians or non-whites than many writers of her time.

Clouds of Witness now loaded on my Kindle. Onward!

Jim says

Mildly amusing, mid 1920s Sherlock Holmes wanna-be Lord Peter Wimsey & his Scotland Yard side-kick Parker try to solve a murder that only Wimsey believes in at first. I would have liked it at half its length, as a BBC play, or even a movie more. It was very well read.

The characters were good. Mrs. Climpson, one of too many women with nothing to do, was elegantly put to work ferreting out secrets & Bunter was the perfect man-servant. Parker was a bit of cardboard straight man, though. Wimsey was well done, of course. He is a hoot. I'm not much on English humor, but this had me chuckling occasionally. Very well turned phrases & appropriate quotations.

Third in the series, I was told that they stood alone well enough that I shouldn't worry too much about finding the first. That held true. It was quite easy to pick up the setting & everyone's positions within it.

The plot was fairly obtuse. It took a long time for the motive to come to light & relied mostly on Wimsey's witty repartee as he makes the long search to put the pieces together. The villain was so obvious from the first that I kept waiting for a twist that never came. I don't think I'll listen to another, at least no time soon.

Sandy *The world could end while I was reading and I would never notice* says

This is by far my favourite Sayer so far.

The Whittaker case begins almost imperceptibly, with the overhearing of a casual remark in a Soho restaurant where Lord Peter Wimsey and Charles Parker are dining. It ends amid a roar of publicity that shakes England from end to end.

A wealthy old woman is died some three years earlier, a little earlier than was expected, but then she was in the last stages of cancer. Miss Dawson's death has aroused no suspicion, despite her doctor's dismay at her end coming so quickly. But something tells Wimsey that this was, indeed, an unnatural death, and he makes a bet with Parker that he can prove it.

Lord Peter's personality grows in leaps and bounds in this, the third of the Lord Peter Wimsey series. Lord Peter's family are not in evidence, but his friend Charles Parker, and the loyal manservant Bunter are both there, and Wimsey is aided by the intelligence of Miss Climpson whom he sends out to the Hampshire village to be his ear to the ground.

A lovely, lovely read. And I am greatly looking forward to reading the next in the series.

Jan C says

Found the audio copy of this at the library waiting for me to go to North Carolina.

Enjoyable. Made the miles fly by.

While this was my 6th reading of this book, I apparently forgot the conclusion or the killer.

I was driving along trying to figure it out when the light bulb went off.

Cindy Rollins says

I decided to begin my rereadings of the Lord Peter books with book 3. I have started over on volumes 1 and 2 so many times that I thought it would be better to skip them and get right to it.

This is a delightful episode in the series with the appearance of Miss Climpson. It is also quite a series of contrasts between the various female spinster characters in the book.

I almost finished the book today during my three hour stint at the DMV, keeping up my record of reading appropriate literature while waiting, waiting, waiting at the DMV. I told Alex he would have an unnatural death if he failed his test and I had to return to that place. He was in full agreement and passed with flying colors.

Evgeny says

A wealthy woman in a countryside was dying of cancer. She had the best possible care: a loving niece, a competent nurse, and a doctor specializing in cancer treatment. For all the care you can imagine that her illness was even more serious at that time - in the beginning of the twentieth century. So she finally died. Everybody was expecting the event except for the doctor who was ready to stake his professional reputation that the death came a little early and way too unexpected. He insisted on autopsy, could not find anything and was forced to leave his practice in a small town because of his resulting reputation as a troublemaker who cannot let the dead rest in peace.

He met Lord Peter Wimsey in London by pure accident and told him this story. The amateur sleuth became curious and decided to investigate further. Some interesting development followed.

I rated the previous book with 2 stars and was about to give up on the series - sufficient to say I only remember a couple of scenes from book #2 and completely forgotten the overall plot. This turned out a great improvement, but not exactly what I expected.

The biggest question of a good mystery is whodunit.

This time the "who" part was obvious fairly early, which left two secondary traditional questions of mystery: "why" and "how". The magic of this installment was in the fact that these two secondary questions were enough to make an exciting read; they carried the whole plot. The reveal of the culprit early was used very successfully later in Columbo, but in that case we witness the full crime in the beginning; this book retained some mystery elements.

Lord Peter Wimsey became more fleshed out and less annoying. I still do not like his accent though. I was hoping for his servant Bunter to become more interesting, but the guy had practically no screen time.

And thus my rating is 4 stars and my interest in the series is renewed. Lord Peter Wimsey is not completely hopeless after all, but Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot he is not.

Dorothea says

I have managed to rate 76 books so far, everything from Regency romance to labor history with the same five-star system, but I can't do this one. Stars do not apply. I rate *Unnatural Death* **ARRRGHH!**

Purely as a mystery, I think it's excellent -- excellent and very grim, the grimmer the more I think about it.

With regard to the female characters (always something I pay great attention to with Sayers), it's both deeply satisfying and terribly uncomfortable.

And then, race. Oh god, Sayers. Why? Why did you have to be a "product of her time" in that particular way? Why were you so. damn. thoroughly a product of your time, and why *was* your time that way, even though Ida B. Wells was of your mother's generation?

** spoilers commence **

The mystery:

The premise is that Wimsey and Parker happen to hear a doctor's story about the death of his elderly patient, a death that seemed suspicious to the doctor but to no one else. Despite Parker's lack of interest, Wimsey begins to pry into the affair. Presently, a woman Wimsey has been trying to contact dies in a sudden, though apparently natural way. Mysterious circumstances pile up and at the end two witnesses are murdered, at least three more people have come near murder, and the murderer herself commits suicide.

Wimsey is interested in this case because the original death of the old woman strikes him as a "perfect murder" -- one that leaves behind no evidence and arouses no suspicion. He theorizes that murderers only get caught when they make mistakes in covering up for themselves. Wimsey supposes that many deaths are in fact murders. The problem is that in attempting to bring these unsuspected murderers to justice, the sleuth stirs up the affair and incites the murderer to take further steps to hide -- more desperately, more brutally as Wimsey nears the truth.

Wimsey and the reader are left, at the close of the novel, with the horrible question of how responsible Wimsey is for all this devastation.

The female characters:

Specifically, this is a book about lesbians.

The original murder victim, the old lady Agatha Dawson, is being taken care of by her grand-niece at the time of her death. Prior to this, she had lived at a country estate with her life partner, Clara Whittaker. How these two women are described is maybe my favorite thing that I've read so far by Sayers. Miss Dawson and Miss Whittaker met at school and became best friends. Their siblings married (producing the great-niece) and Miss Dawson and Miss Whittaker, deciding that marriage and men were not for them, set up housekeeping together. Miss Whittaker was a very enterprising woman who knew all about horses, and she began keeping a stable, which made her rich. Miss Dawson was the more domestic and retiring of the two, but very proud of Miss Whittaker's accomplishments. When Miss Whittaker died, she left all her money to

Miss Dawson.

The two old ladies and their relationship are mostly described by an elderly countryman and woman who worked for the Whittaker family all their lives. They have nothing but admiration and affection for the couple, whom they describe as being devoted to one another, and for Miss Whittaker -- "The Lord makes a few on 'em that way to suit 'Is own purposes, I suppose."

There's never any mention that Miss Dawson and Miss Whittaker's relationship was sexual, but I didn't find that to be a problem -- perhaps it wasn't; perhaps it was but it's not relevant to the old countryfolk, Wimsey, Sayers, or the reader. What matters is that they were devoted to one another, and nobody in *Unnatural Death* judges them for that or even finds it especially unusual.

But then there's the younger Miss Whittaker, the great-niece and the murder suspect. She is also meant to be read as a lesbian. (N.B., Sayers never uses the word "lesbian" or says much about being sexually attracted to women. She does write about being sexually *unattracted* to men, having a deep need to live independently of men, and being emotionally attached to women.)

The younger Miss Whittaker exhibits the same traits as the elder Miss Whittaker: stubborn independence, explicit disdaining of having anything to do with men, confident and powerful body language, and being in a close relationship with another women (in this case, Vera Findlater). But while the elder Miss Whittaker isn't judged and receives fond admiration for these very traits, the younger Miss Whittaker is portrayed as unnatural and suspicious.

It's true that a lot of this suspicion comes from Miss Climpson, not from Wimsey or the narrator. (Oh, Miss Climpson! Having loved her in *Strong Poison*, I was so happy to find her so prominent in *Unnatural Death*, which is the first book in which she appears. But although I still love her, I can't love her as much now that I've seen more of her opinions.) Miss Climpson, we learn, is a spinster of necessity, not by choice, but, having lived her life among other spinsters, she understands unmarried women very well. So when she becomes the confidante of Vera Findlater, she is worried by the "schoolgirl crush" Miss Findlater has for Miss Whittaker -- an unhealthy passion, which makes Miss Findlater susceptible to being abused by Miss Whittaker...

At first I hoped that we were just seeing the more foolish, prejudiced side of Miss Climpson, and that she would turn out to be wrong. In fact, I hoped that by duplicating the life of the elder Miss Whittaker, the younger would be demonstrating her innocence. But she's not. She *is* abusing Miss Findlater's loyalty, and in the end Miss Findlater is the victim of her most horrible murder.

The plot, Wimsey's perceptions, and the narrator's description all enforce Miss Climpson's diagnosis that Miss Whittaker, because of her lesbian characteristics, is an unnatural and suspicious woman. (To be clear, I'm not saying that Sayers is being homophobic because she made a lesbian the murderer. What's problematic is that her lesbiamness is a major part of what makes her suspicious.)

I think the only way to save the situation is to say that maybe it *is* Wimsey's fault. Perhaps if he hadn't begun his unsolicited investigation, the younger Miss Whittaker could have developed almost-blamelessly into the elder Miss Whittaker, life-partner and all, and nobody would have found her unnatural.

But that's a stretch. So I don't really know what to make of it. I can't help but love the elder Miss Whittaker and Miss Dawson -- but I'm confused and hurt by how Sayers could write them and also write about the younger Miss Whittaker as she did.

Race:

To begin, while investigating the Dawson family in search of relatives who could have a better claim to Miss Dawson's money than the younger Miss Whittaker, Wimsey stumbles upon the Reverend Hallelujah Dawson. The elderly Rev. Dawson is the grandson of Miss Dawson's great-uncle. The great-uncle had a sugar plantation in the West Indies, and had a child with a Trinidadian woman, to whom he was not married. As this child was the Rev. Dawson's father, the Rev. Dawson has no legal claim to the Dawson money, and he knows this quite well. However, being impoverished, he has come to England to see if his relatives can help him. Before her death Miss Dawson had made him an allowance, and expected that her heir would continue it, but Miss Whittaker had stopped it.

Wimsey first hears of the Rev. Dawson through a letter from Miss Climpson. She's reporting on her investigative gossip with a woman who used to be Miss Dawson's housekeeper, and who remembered a "n***er" who visited Miss Dawson. (Miss Climpson reports the housekeeper's extremely racist description while disavowing it herself, but not in a way that makes Miss Climpson entirely innocent of racism.)

Wimsey then goes to meet the Rev. Dawson, whom the narrator describes in a way that Sayers clearly intended to be respectful. That doesn't count for very much when she still manages to use the word "rolling" to describe his eyes. Wimsey's attitude to the Reverend is annoying in a very Wimsey-ish way: he feels sorry for him, while making jokes about his first name and about non-Conformist ministers.

This is all bad enough, *and* pretty much what I expected from Sayers when I first realized she was going to introduce a black character.

What actually, deeply shocked me has very little to do with how Sayers portrayed the Rev. Dawson. It happens close to the end, when Wimsey is convinced Miss Whittaker is the murderer and only wants evidence to convict her, and when she's most desperate to escape him.

Miss Whittaker has needed to use Vera Findlater as an alibi, but she has long known that Miss Findlater, knowing too much, could be used against her. Several months previously, she began to prepare a backup plan by which she could dispose of Miss Findlater and pin the blame on someone else. At that time she bought some articles of men's clothing in the Rev. Dawson's name. Now, she and Miss Findlater go off on a daytrip. Miss Whittaker kills Miss Findlater and arranges footprints (with the shoes she'd bought) and other false evidence suggesting that two men killed Miss Findlater and kidnapped Miss Whittaker. Then she runs away, disguised as another woman whose identity she has already established.

One of the pieces of false evidence she leaves is a copy of a magazine, *The Black Mask*, with the first two words of the title underlined.

Investigating the scene, Wimsey discovers this magazine. He has already figured out that Miss Whittaker has faked everything. Although the clothing hasn't been traced yet and so the Rev. Dawson's name hasn't come in, he correctly deduces that Miss Whittaker is trying to suggest that one of the men who are supposed to have kidnapped her and killed Miss Findlater is black, and that one of the female victims marked the magazine cover in hopes of helping a rescuer.

Because he doesn't want Miss Whittaker to know that he's on her trail, Wimsey allows the police and newspaper reporters to be deceived by the false evidence. The result:

The Whittaker case had begun almost imperceptibly, in the overhearing of a casual remark

dropped in a Soho restaurant; it ended amid a roar of publicity that shook England from end to end and crowded even Wimbledon into the second place. The bare facts of the murder and kidnapping appeared exclusively that night in a Late Extra edition of the *Evening Views*. Next morning it sprawled over the Sunday papers with photographs and full details, actual and imaginary. The idea of two English girls -- the one brutally killed, the other carried off for some end unthinkably sinister, by a black man -- aroused all the passion of horror and indignation of which the English temperament is capable. Reporters swarmed down upon Crow's Beach like locusts -- the downs near Shelly Head were like a fair with motors, bicycles and parties on foot, rushing out to spend a happy week-end amid surroundings of mystery and bloodshed.

I am imagining a fan of detective stories in the United States, an African American reader of the Lord Peter Wimsey stories, who buys all of them as soon as they come out, who in 1927 bought *Unnatural Death* and is reading it at his or her breakfast table with the morning newspaper folded away next to the plate.

Whose name is in that newspaper? I don't know in what month *Unnatural Death* was published in the U.S. If it was May, perhaps the newspaper mentioned Jonathan Carter. If June, perhaps David and Lee Blackman.

I found these three men's names on this list, which does not give details, but I can guess what happened to them: Someone made a claim that a bad thing had happened to a white woman, and that a black man had done it. The newspapers reported this. The notion "aroused all the passion and horror of which the [Southern] temperament is capable" -- that might, later, be a line published in one of these newspapers. Thus aroused, a mob of white Southerners rushed out to enact justice by killing a black man -- it didn't matter very much which one. Then, a festive atmosphere, a picnic at the foot of the tree.

I am sure that Sayers, with her keen interest in crime, knew about lynching. Lynching did not, I think, occur in Britain, but some incidents were reported internationally, and I don't think Ida B. Wells was the last anti-lynching activist to make a speaking tour of England (in 1893 and 1894). What comes through in *Unnatural Death* is an awareness of how white people react en masse to the accusation of a black man of raping a white woman -- and perhaps a vague sense that for this reaction, the public are rather vulgar and excitable -- and *no* awareness of the consequences of this reaction for any black bystander.

Unnatural Death is a story about Wimsey's responsibility for the results of his investigations. Encouraging the public to believe the story that Miss Whittaker set up is the most directly irresponsible thing I have ever read of Wimsey doing, and yet Sayers doesn't treat it that way at all. Yes, this is England, not the U.S. South. I can't make that matter to me very much.

"The *Yell* came out with the [false story] all over the front page this morning, and a patriotic leader about the danger of encouraging coloured aliens." Wimsey is worried by this -- only because the rival newspaper has obtained the real story and will be eager to publish it, and this might tip off Miss Whittaker.

I don't think it occurs to Sayers at all that there are any "coloured aliens" in Britain who could be harmed by this situation, except for the Rev. Dawson. He is arrested. But (as would not be taken for granted in the U.S. South) he is otherwise well, and at the end Wimsey is cheered to learn that he has come into some of Miss Whittaker's money after all. I was relieved and rather surprised to find him come safely to the end of the story...

I don't want very much from Sayers here. I don't ask that she leave out Miss Whittaker's false evidence, because I find that entirely believable -- I remember reading a case of a white woman pinning her own crime

on a black man just last year. I don't really want Sayers to have left out the Rev. Dawson, because I was happy to see a character of color in one of her stories, even though she described him somewhat clumsily. And the reader is definitely supposed to know that Wimsey is not a perfect sleuth, not a moral paragon, not an example to follow. This story is all about how he might in fact be completely wrong. I would be fine with Wimsey not quite realizing that by encouraging Miss Whittaker's false evidence, he was taking still more people's lives into his hands. But what I *do* want is for the readers to know that this was what he was doing -- all the readers, not just the contemporary readers who could not *not* make that connection, and current readers who know a bit about U.S. history.

Jaline says

This book was validation for my choice in reading a series in order. Dorothy L. Sayers really hit her stride in this book – all of her regular characters are more fully developed, and the new ones introduced come through at the same higher quality of 3D. There is also an 11-page bonus section at the end: a ‘biography’ of Lord Peter Wimsey, written by his ‘uncle’. I put the quotes in because obviously the uncle is created by the author as well. What I liked about the bonus section is that it gives a family overview and goes into more depth with the little nuggets of Lord Peter’s personality we previously encounter in the series. Great stuff!

This story starts out with Lord Peter introducing Charles Parker (the Scotland Yard Inspector Detective) to a woman in a small apartment. The chapter starts with a quote saying that there are two million more women than men in England and Wales. This makes sense after the devastation of lives lost in World War I. Lord Peter gets the inspiration that this is a huge, untapped workforce of brilliant people. Thus, he has hired this “spinster” (not by choice, as she says) named Miss Alexandra Katherine Climpson as his “Enquiry Agent” – or Private Investigator, as we say on this side of the Pond.

There is also a very cloak and dagger conversation with a doctor who won’t even give his name, yet he wants to find out if anything can be done about a medical case of his - one that he feels was somehow speeded along in her departure from this world. The whole situation created a scandal for himself and the relief nurse with whom he fell in love and was engaged to.

Lord Peter is convinced right away that there is foul play involved but with no information at all, he has to build a case out of thin air – including finding out who his victim is. As his mission progresses, more bodies begin appearing and Lord Peter is beside himself. He believes it is his fault for opening this creaking vault door in the first place.

We have a good idea – if we trust Lord Peter’s intuition – who the culprit is, but getting the proof and finding the details needed to build a warrantable case is the challenge. There are multiple threads to follow and they all have snags and snarls that need to be unraveled along the way.

I really enjoyed this story a lot. Miss Climpson’s letters to Lord Peter as she reports in with her Capitals, underlines and MANY exclamation marks (!!!) makes me want to swear off using those ever again. But I won’t. I love my exclamation marks too much!
