



Final Curtain

Ngaio Marsh

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After a lethal birthday dinner of champagne and crayfish, famed Shakespearian actor Sir Henry is dead, and the cast of suspects is a mile long.

Final Curtain Details

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From Reader Review Final Curtain for online ebook

Andree says

4.5 stars, but I thought I'd round up, because it's a high point in the series. Hearing about this one made me come back to this series. This one I quite like.

The Ancreds are interesting enough. Some of the character moments are quite good within the family, and between the family and Troy. I like Troy as a narrator in the first half. I also like some of the discussion of her painting. I like Alleyn and Troy both struggling with worries about a reconciliation (and whether they will feel the same way) after 3+ years apart.

I feel like the sparseness with which Marsh generally describes the character moments works much better in this one than in say, *Artists in Crime* (when it feels more like key moments are just skipped, and the ones that do exist could use a bit more detail). I also like where they end up re: Alleyn feeling like he can discuss the case with her, without it raising unpleasant associations from her. And their reactions to the other suddenly being around are fairly excellent.

So yeah, I like this one.

Sarah says

I don't think I'll ever get bored of a good mystery: Christie, Tey, and Marsh being my favorite authors.

Jo says

When a book is written in the 1940's it can be expected to have the prejudices of the day, but this one had the trifecta of comments about Jews, black people and a character who embodied all of the most offensive gay stereotypes. All this stood out in sharp relief because the plot was not that interesting, and all the characters were horrible. The murder was not even convincing.

Michael says

Like a lot of parlor mysteries, this one pursues a logic all its own. Well, not quite all its own -- it's pretty heavily influenced by the dodgy psychological insights of the day, even while it thinks it's mocking them. And yet it's a very comfortable tale with familiar and colorful characters, and I was a bit disappointed when it came to its (more or less arbitrary) end. So I suppose I "really liked it."

Nell says

More enjoyable than the last few because of the reunion in London of Alleyn with Fox and, of course, Troy. I hadn't realized that Alleyn's wartime duties had taken him away for three years or more. Marsh's interest in the theater and fine arts continues in the setting.

William says

I read somewhere that "Died in the Wool" was Marsh's favorite in her Alleyn series, and I liked it a lot but this one is even better. It's not quite five stars to me, since it ends a bit suddenly and it was not as personally satisfying a conclusion as I would have preferred. But it was a lot of fun to read.

This Alleyn installment has a group of vivid characters, representing the steady growth in fiction-writing that I am seeing as I work my way through the series. The story does in a way remind me of "A Surfeit of Lampreys," though the Lamprey family was charming and delightful and the Ancreds here are far from that. But each person in this isolated country house is quite individual, and not like any previous Marsh character.

Alleyn's wife, Agatha Troy, comes to life a lot more here than in any previous book. Even more interesting, the relationship between her and Rory develops a lot more nuance and texture. The issue of how much work one's brings home mentally is still a real one, and interesting to explore.

As other readers have pointed out, there are some unattractive ways this book is the product of its era. I find it difficult to see how writers can be expected to write within the context of moral issues not explored in the time in which they live. Yes, there are references we fortunately never use (such as the "n" word). As an aside, though, the fact that we no longer use some offensive terms and stereotypes (and this is a good thing) we have hardly escaped the mindset which generates them.

I understand and to some extent share the discomfort others mention with the Cedric's portrayal. However, I actually sort of liked him, and found his style of speaking fascinating and often funny. Sure, he appears to be an effeminate gay man, but there are indeed people like Cedric, and it's hard to conclude that a writer cannot include a character like this. Yes, it would be preferable to have a more nuanced portrayal of gay life, but in the oppressive world of the 1940's, I would think aside from individuals like Cedric, gay life was essentially invisible to outsiders.

Anyway, this is a good mystery, well-written and well-crafted. I enjoyed it.

Kris says

The reviewer notes on the cover said it was "time to stop comparing Marsh to Agatha Christie, and start comparing Christie to Marsh", implying (and elsewhere boldly stating) that Marsh was the better writer. I've read just about everything Christie put out, and quite a bit of Marsh's oeuvre, and while I like Marsh's work, it doesn't seem to be any better than Christie's. (Yeah, I used the word "oeuvre" in a sentence. Jealous much?)

This particular work is pretty good, but (of course) there are a couple things I don't like about it. There are a number of instances of the writer playing the "I think we all know what I'm talking about here" game, where I got completely lost. I got the references to Cedric being a pouf (and I realize that when this was written, in 1947, Marsh would not have been able to come right out and say Cedric was gay), but there are a number of

other instances where I felt like everyone else was in on the joke and I was left out. Marsh also spent a bit of time exploring the relationship between her detective, Roderick Alleyn, and his wife. The crux of the issue here was whether, after being separated for so long by the war, the two would be able to pick up where they left off, relationship-wise, or whether they would have lost any feeling for each other. All very interesting, and probably very vital to the post-war readers of Marsh's books, but really? In a mystery novel? It just seemed to muddy the waters.

As I said, overall an enjoyable example of the genre, but definitely not worthy of the "better-than-Christie" hype.

Jj Li says

tl;dr: If Troy could keep tripping over bodies, that'd be great.

Before Alleyn and Troy and Peter and Harriet, I was firmly against detectives marrying. Eve and Roarke were one things, but for most couples, they are most crashingly dull, and that perfectly intelligent human beings can't be bothered to figure out interpersonal relationships and instead go through this agony of indecision (because apparently married = boring) drives me nuts. Troy, though, is written as a fully formed human being with her own capabilities and interests that occasionally trips into her husband cases, as is proper, and the only way this reader could be any more satis

This mystery, while not entirely predictable, was nevertheless pretty standard with strongly dislikeable characters. Neither means, method, or motive are especially noteable, but it doesn't drag. Troy is what bumps it up to a four star for me. Still a fun and enjoyable read though.

Grace Tierney says

The only reason I'm not giving five stars is that I worked out the method of the murder early on. This is my first Marsh novel and even coming late to the series it was easy to get the hang of the central characters. Unlike more recent crime fiction which seems to need a corpse in the opening chapter and several more thereafter this one takes its time and is the better for it as the author takes 50% of the pages to setup all the horrible suspects in this diva-filled family in their country house. Thankfully I had Agatha Troy as a sympathetic character to root for. I also enjoyed learning about the process of portrait painting.

Unlike others here I enjoyed the whole married couple reuniting after the war subplot (perhaps because I'm married to somebody who is away for work regularly?) but even if you dislike that, it's easy enough to skip.

If you enjoy Golden Age British detective fiction you should enjoy this one.

George says

#14 in the suave and debonair, Scotland Yard Superintendent Roderick Alleyn mystery series. Alleyn is detached, sophisticated and expensively educated.

It is early November and Troy has been invited to Ancreton Manor to paint to paint the portrait of seventy-

five famed Shakespearian actor Sir Henry Ancred as Macbeth which she reluctantly accepts. Meanwhile, her husband, Roderick Alleyn has been on the other side of the world for over three years doing secret war work is finally returning home.

Troy arrives at a very uncomfortable family house party celebrating Sir Henry's 75th birthday. She finds herself in the middle of a high-strung theatrical family prone to hysterics, tears, fights, fainting fits in any trying situation and Sir Henry's tendency to change his will regularly in anger. What a cast of over the top supporting characters!!! It is not long before Sir Henry is dead and the waters are muddied by the family's difficult child who is constantly playing pranks. Based upon Troy's keen observations, Alleyn is able to unravel it all.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in August 1998.

The war is finally over, and Alleyn is returning from New Zealand - where the previous two books in the series, Colour Scheme and Died In The Wool, are set - to join his wife in London. Just as Troy is expecting him back any day, she receives an extremely pressing invitation: distinguished actor Sir Henry Ancred wishes to commission her to paint his portrait at his family seat, Ancreton. This invitation is occasioned by Sir Henry receiving the (inaccurate) news that the nation commissioned Troy to paint a portrait of one of his friends and rivals.

Truth to tell, though he may have been a magnificent actor, Sir Henry's talent could never have matched his conceit. As far as he was concerned, the nation has never been as quick to recognise his status as great man of the stage as it should have been; even his knighthood is not a grateful acknowledgment of his stature but was obtained by the somewhat unexpected inheritance of a baronetcy from a distant cousin.

In the end, Troy accepts and travels to Ancreton, where she is plunged into the midst of a bizarre family gathering; theatrical eccentricity is part and parcel of being an Ancred. The family (other than Sir Henry) is united only in their dislike of Sonia Orrincourt, a beautiful blonde plucked from the chorus by Sir Henry, virtually in his dotage but likely to step into a second marriage at any moment - particularly when his family enrage him.

A series of unpleasant practical jokes is followed by the death of Sir Henry; Troy suspects it is something more serious than eating crayfish when suffering from a stomach disorder. Luckily, Alleyn has just now returned, and he is able to disentangle the whole complex plot.

Final Curtain is one of the better known Ngaio Marsh novels, and it is the first I ever read by her. It is not one of her best, though; it shows distinct signs of a return to the formulaic house party crime novel she was writing before the two set in New Zealand. It has an upper class family only rivalled in grotesque eccentricity by the Lampreys (in A Surfeit Of Lampreys) and the sort of implausible puzzle gently mocked by Michael Innes in There Came Both Mist And Snow. As an example of the classic detection genre, you could hardly chose a novel more typical, but Marsh can offer far better.

FangirlNation says

Famous painter Agatha Troy has three weeks to wait for the return of Detective Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn from four years' service in New Zealand during the Second World War as Ngaio Marsh's Final Curtain opens. She gets invited (well, pretty much commanded) to go to Ancreton, the home of Sir Henry Ancred to paint the old actor in his most famous role as Macbeth. After initially turning the "great man" down, Troy gives in and travels to the castle to paint the man's portrait. While there she meets the whole extended family, all but one of whom work in the theater business, as well as Sir Henry's paramour, Sonia Orrincourt, a failed actress herself. And while there, Troy becomes witness to and subject of some childish pranks that everyone is eager to attribute to the youngest granddaughter, Panty, despite Troy's conviction that Panty has not committed all of these acts.

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

Andrea says

The first post-war Alleyn, taking its start in Troy's world. Troy is one of my favourite characters (in and out of the Alleyn mysteries) and so her tale, among the over-dramatic Ancreds, is engrossing for me, and it's nice to see her and Alleyn settle some of the 'business' of being married, of working out how to be together.

The real oddity of this story for me is that it's a Troy story which involves a beautiful and morally bereft woman called Sonia. Given that Troy's introduction involved the murder of the beautiful and morally bereft Sonia Gluck, I found the use of the name again very distracting, particularly as neither Troy nor Alleyn commented on it, even when discussing how to deal with his job.

Without the time spent in Troy's life, this book would probably be a 3 star, but she lifts it for me.

Miriam says

A marvelous book! We get Troy and Roderick both, which I do love. And both points of view, which I find fun. The puzzle is complex, and I wasn't sure till the very end who was the culprit, which is the very best.

It's important to remember, if you haven't the context, that Alleyn was sent to New Zealand for his war work, and Troy was in England doing hers, so they were apart 3 years. And remember, you couldn't really phone NZ from UK at that point - calling from one part of the country to another required a live operator and a waiting period for an open line. So for 3 years, they had only letters. And he didn't just fly home - he takes a ship, and she doesn't know for weeks when he will arrive. They manage to get her 3 days notice when the ship is close. So different from our lives today!

It's well worth a read - and if you aren't reading the whole series, you might want to read *Artists in Crime* first, the 6th in the series, which is the book where Roddy and Troy first meet.

Susan says

This is not as riveting as some of Marsh's books, but is still a very good read. I had read it a couple times before and was pretty sure I remembered who the murderer was, which removed some of the immediacy. Troy has been commissioned to paint a portrait of an old actor, Sir Henry Ancred. Although she is given a very short amount of time to do it, he is someone she has wanted to paint, so she accepts. Also her husband Rory Alleyn has been gone for a couple years on duty, so she is at loose ends. She goes to Sir Henry's huge home Ancreton, and finds that he wants to be painted in one of his famous roles, as Macbeth. It is almost time for his birthday party, when the portrait will be unveiled, and the family is gathering. Most of them are emotional, over-reacting, and prone to histrionics, and there is a fair amount of bickering and loud arguments amongst the family. To add to the mix, Sir Henry has lately imported a blonde chorus girl, Sonia, as his mistress, and is threatening to marry her. This throws the family into even more disorder, since he keeps changing his will. On the night of his birthday, he dies - the doctor says it is his stomach disorder and his heart, brought on by eating rich food and flying into a rage when his portrait is unveiled and is seen to be marred by an overpainting of green cows (fortunately it was dry and is not ruined.) Various practical jokes have been happening, most of which are blamed on Panty, his granddaughter, although Troy feels she is telling the truth when she says she doesn't do it. Troy also suspects that Sir Henry's death is not natural. After she goes home, her husband Rory returns and is asked to look into Sir Henry's death, since a number of anonymous letters have been received saying there is a murderer in the house. They seem to refer to Sonia, who benefited greatly from the will he changed at the last moment. Since Troy was a witness, Alleyn isn't sure he should take it - he feels he should keep his personal and professional lives separate. But Troy decides it is time she got involved and stopped trying to ignore his job as a policeman. Suspicion bounces from one to another of the family members, and when Sonia is also poisoned, Alleyn begins to see through the confusion and eventually lights on the murderer.
