



Gaudy Night

Dorothy L. Sayers

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“*Gaudy Night* stands out even among Miss Sayers’s novels. And Miss Sayers has long stood in a class by herself.”

—*Times Literary Supplement*

The great Dorothy L. Sayers is considered by many to be the premier detective novelist of the Golden Age, and her dashing sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey, one of mystery fiction’s most enduring and endearing protagonists. Acclaimed author Ruth Rendell has expressed her admiration for Sayers’s work, praising her “great fertility of invention, ingenuity, and wonderful eye for detail.” The third Dorothy L. Sayers classic to feature mystery writer Harriet Vane, *Gaudy Night* is now back in print with an introduction by Elizabeth George, herself a crime fiction master. *Gaudy Night* takes Harriet and her paramour, Lord Peter, to Oxford University, Harriet’s alma mater, for a reunion, only to find themselves the targets of a nightmare of harassment and mysterious, murderous threats.

Gaudy Night Details

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From Reader Review Gaudy Night for online ebook

Jane says

Where I got the book: my bookshelf. This is a 1940 Gollancz edition I picked up somewhere and I absolutely love it because no matter where you are in the story, the book lays flat and keeps its place. I get so impatient with books that won't stay open.

The story: five years after being erroneously accused--and then, thanks to Lord Peter Wimsey, acquitted--of murdering her lover, Harriet Vane is getting on with her life as a writer and puzzling over what she's going to do about Lord Peter: push him out of her life or accede to his marriage proposals? She's invited back to Oxford to visit her old college, where a mysterious prankster and writer of anonymous notes seems to have a grudge against academic women in general and Shrewsbury College in particular. Called in to investigate, Harriet ponders whether an intellectual woman should allow love into her life or whether retirement into a life of learning is the answer. The appearance of Peter in Oxford to help with her investigations could be disastrous--maybe.

This is my favorite Wimsey book, and probably one of my favorite love stories of all time. It is, I think, Sayers' most feminist novel, showing women trying to carve out an existence for themselves that has nothing to do with men, and yet acknowledging that love and relationships can have a place in a woman's life without totally destroying her true self. I think Sayers is arguing for give and take; it's true even today that women make a certain sacrifice, far more than men do, when they enter into a marriage (the physical and emotional effects of childbearing and the change in status are still very real, despite our so-called progress) and I think Sayers is seeking, not so much an end to such sacrifice but an acknowledgement that it is real and should not be entered into lightly.

After pulling Wimsey and Vane through two novels, Sayers is faced with the challenge of getting two emotionally scarred characters to the big Yes, and she does so through Harriet's eyes, using her beloved Oxford as the catalyst. In the (disturbed) peace of academe, Harriet is able to reconcile her past with her present, explore Wimsey's own vulnerabilities and finally acknowledge her physical attraction to him. It's that attraction, it seems to me, that's the clincher; Sayers clearly believes that marriage must be a union of bodies first and foremost, and that the emotional and intellectual side of things will sort itself out if the physical bond is strong enough.

It's also interesting that Harriet's new insights into her own feelings bring about a revolution in her development as a writer. It's often been said that Harriet is Sayers herself, and indeed I have always had the impression that Sayers fell in love with her own creation, Wimsey, and wrote herself into the stories so that he could fall for her; a very interesting statement about the life of the imagination! Whether that's true or not, I happen to find Harriet convincing in her own right, but what she discovers about her writing in *Gaudy Night* may well be a reflection of Sayers' feelings about how a detective novel *should* be, i.e. no mere intellectual puzzle but a true novel with psychological growth in the characters. I think we take it for granted today that the characters in a novel should have a growth arc, recognizing two-dimensional characters for what they are and scorning them; I think we tend to forget that even some of the best writers of bygone decades tended to deal far more in caricatures and "types" than we would now accept. What we still read now are the ones that survived precisely because they were a cut above the others.

Gaudy Night, famously, contains no murder but there are a whole lot of motives for murder, all centered on human relationships. Sayers tackles the demons (her own, I can't help but thinking) of possessiveness and

jealousy, and the kind of love that wants to absorb its object. She argues for balance; but does she entirely achieve it with her lead characters? I'm not so sure.

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

3.5 stars for Gaudy Night by Dorothy L. Sayers.

There was much to like about this book. Sayers characterisation was, as always, quite superb. She lays a meandering trail of red herrings which she mainly disproves, then brings back into the realm of possibility. I learnt a lot about Oxford life - there is really nothing with which to compare it in NZ, and what little I knew of it previously came from Morse.

But this seemed to be an exceedingly long book. Not that it was boring, because it most certainly was not, but there seemed to be so much 'filler' for lack of a better term. Somewhere I read that Sayers is known for her attention to detail. In Gaudy Night I think she has given it just a little too much attention. Had I been her editor, I would have had my red pencil out!

Harriet Vane returns to Oxford for Gaudy Night with some trepidation, and is drawn into solving a Poison Pen mystery. Senior Common Room in Shrewsbury are being targeted with anonymous vile accusations, threats and damage to their possessions. One student attempts suicide as a result of the hate campaign and members of the SCR find themselves fearful and distrusting old friends and colleagues as suspicion and rumours spread.

Lord Peter is not in evidence until some 2/3 of the way through the book. We meet his delightful but dissolute nephew, the Viscount Saint-George who takes a shine to Harriet and nominates her his honorary 'aunt'.

Harriet sees a new side to Peter and finds herself reconsidering her position in his life.

This isn't my favourite Sayer, but yes, I enjoyed reading it and am looking forward to the next in the series.

Nikki says

Over a year ago now, Lord Peter pretty much saved my life. I was hysterical and still half under anaesthesia; the nurses were unsympathetic; I have an anxiety disorder as it is, let alone when I'm in a great deal of pain with insufficient morphine. My blood oxygen levels were catastrophic, even with pure oxygen. My mother forced her way onto the ward and held my hand. When they made her go, my blood oxygenation was up a little, but not much; she didn't let them send her away until she'd put her Kindle by my pillow, playing Edward Petherbridge reading Dorothy L. Sayers. Under that influence, I lay still and quiet, and listened, and breathed.

Not coincidentally, Edward Petherbridge slightly overshadows Ian Carmichael in my affections, and I don't think I'll ever be able to read Gaudy Night without sympathising wholly with Harriet's realisation of her own feelings. I could find no fault with it this time, neither in the slow build or anything else. I don't think I'll ever be rational about Lord Peter again, and I was already a fair way to in love with the character.

He can be ridiculous, but he's so good; sometimes, in the other books, I think I resented Harriet a little for her treatment of him. But she's in an awful position too, and *Gaudy Night* makes that clear -- and my goodness, the scenes where she starts to finally realise her physical (animal?) attraction to him are a little breathtaking. Peter's too perfect, of course, especially in *Gaudy Night* -- but in a perfect way I find impossible to fault!

Sayers' Oxford is a lovely thing, too. Once upon a time, I went to Cambridge to look round and simply felt choked by it all, but I think that when I visit Oxford, I'll be ready and willing to love it through Sayers' eyes. It's a powerfully nostalgic version of university life, especially for someone currently struggling to get any help with a PhD proposal -- oh for Shrewsbury College and the community there!

Madeline says

As I've said numerous times before, I love Lord Peter Wimsey. He's funny, a brilliant detective, and he peppers his speech with Shakespearan quotations the way I pepper mine with *Simpsons* quotes. He can always amuse and amaze me, but up until this point, that was extent of my fascination. Before I read *Gaudy Night*, I had always thought of Lord Peter mainly as an amusing, almost caricature detective. I had thought of him, simply, as a character. After *Gaudy Night*, however, I can't think of him this way anymore. For the first time since reading *Strong Poison*, I see Lord Peter as a human being. For the first time, Dorothy Sayers has presented him as a man, with hopes and fears and weaknesses and emotions. For the first time, Lord Peter is off his pedestal and I'm looking him straight in the eye, and it is wonderful.

I'm already a hefty paragraph into this review and I haven't even mentioned the mystery aspect of this story. It is, technically, a detective novel, but like so many other Sayers novels (but this one in particular), the mystery is really more of a subplot. In case you really care, here's my one-sentence plot encapsulation: Harriet Vane returns to her alma mater at Oxford (one of the few women's colleges at the time, btw) to help figure out who's been playing harmful pranks on the scholars there, and she enlists Lord Peter's help.

That's the whole mystery: who's been leaving insulting notes around Oxford? If that's all you knew about the book, you'd probably be wondering how that could possibly take 500 pages. Simple answer: it doesn't. All together, I would estimate that the actual mystery-solving only accounts for about 200 pages of the entire book. All the rest is about Harriet and Peter. If you don't see how that could possibly be interesting, you obviously haven't read *Strong Poison*. If you have, and still think 300 pages about Harriet and Peter working out their complicated and fascinating relationship would be interesting, you need to read *Strong Poison* again and *pay attention this time*.

In fact, I almost wish I had read more of the Harriet and Peter stories before I read this one - I know there are other novels where they interact, and I think I should read those, then read *Gaudy Night* again just to fully appreciate how far these two incredible characters have gone in order to reach this point.

In conclusion: Harriet Vane and Peter Wimsey are the best detectives ever created, and I will fight any Holmes/Watson fanboys who say otherwise.

PS: Just one thing I wondered about, and I won't give context to this so it won't count as a spoiler BUT - can someone who speaks Latin translate the last two lines of the book? I think I know what they mean, but I want to be totally 100% sure. It had goddamn better mean what I think it means.

Lightreads says

I hesitate to call this ‘a Lord Peter book.’ Peter is here, certainly, though in lesser proportion than you might expect, considering he changes in quiet but extraordinary ways. But this book is rightly and greatly Harriet Vane’s, as she returns to the Oxford college of her education to do some academic work, write her next novel, and investigate some nasty disturbances around the college.

Oh. For Oxford alone, which I love, I could love this book. Luckily, however, there are any number of other reasons. This is a book about pain, about the heart and the mind working in opposition, about academia, about the perils of being an intelligent woman, about the perils of unthinking feminism, about mistakes, about love. Harriet has been trampled over by the world and left in the mud, and I love how Sayers understands the way she would snap and snarl at the first hand that reached out to help her, and resent its very kindness. Harriet wants to stop hurting, and she thinks she knows how.

If only one could come back to this quiet place where only intellectual achievement counted, if one could work here steadily and obscurely at some close-knit piece of reasoning, undistracted and uncorrupted . . . abolishing personal contacts, personal spites, personal jealousies, getting one’s teeth into something dull and durable, maturing into solidity like the Shrewsbury beeches, then one might be able to forget the wreck and chaos of the past, or see it, at any rate, in a truer proportion.

It’s a beautiful thought, and it’s all the ways that academia is not like this that will keep me away.

In this book it’s a more painfully direct question, given the social climate of the times, between academia and marriage. It’s a practical result of separated colleges, of course, but also a more fundamental observation about the ways that female achievement can become a barrier in and of itself. “. . . the rule seemed to be that a great woman must either die unwed . . . or find a still greater man to marry her.” And though the exact correlations of virginity and academia do not apply to us today, the idea of woman having to choose between achievement and relationships still resonates eighty years later. Hell, just ask Time Magazine, apparently.

But it’s more complex for Harriet, who tried living by the heart once before, with disastrous consequences. This book is about her learning to use her heart again, but to do it in balance with the mind. She is coming to know that passion and reason are not antithetical, that applying the second to the first makes them both greater, not less. Peter is learning the same thing from the other side of the coin, as Harriet refuses his proposals again and again and again and he comes to know that simply wanting and asking are an exercise of privilege, and not the extent of love.

“It’s the pressure of other people’s personalities that does the mischief.”

“Yes. . . . You may say you won’t interfere with another person’s soul, but you do merely by existing. The snag about it is the practical difficulty, so to speak, of not existing.”

They both know how awful love can be when it is all heart or all brain, when it presses and demands and makes sacrifices and then says “now what will you do for me in return?” They are both just growing into the awareness that there is another way.

I think, above all, the thing I admire most in this book is the way it practices what it preaches. Sayers' brain is here, as it always has been, but for perhaps the first time, her heart is too. Harriet, her partial avatar, is also learning that the heart is required in equal measure in writing as in love – in any work of importance.

“You would have to abandon the jigsaw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change.”

“I’m afraid to try that, Peter. It might go to near the bone.”

“It might be the wisest thing you could do.”

“Write it out and get rid of it?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll think about that. It would hurt like hell.”

“What would that matter, if it made a good book?”

I won’t go into Sayers’ biography here. But as Peter says, “you can’t keep the feeling out.” The beauty of this book is the way Sayers is here, unashamedly, honestly, with enough distance to be lucid and thoughtful, but enough heart still in it to hurt, and to matter. And that’s the point of the book – writing like that is writing well, and living like that is living well.

Margaret says

Gaudy Night is easily my favorite of Dorothy L. Sayers's beloved series of Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries. It's one of the last in the series and thus hard to talk about without spoiling earlier books, as it deals with the resolution of the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane, the mystery writer first introduced in *Strong Poison* and seen again in *Have His Carcase*. (If you've read no Sayers, please read at least those two books before reading *Gaudy Night*, as otherwise you'll be missing a lot).

Gaudy Night is told almost wholly from Harriet's point of view, and in fact Lord Peter doesn't even appear until more than halfway through the book. When Harriet attends a reunion at Shrewsbury, her Oxford college, she receives a nasty anonymous note. Later, when the poison pen returns and starts to play other pranks, the Dean and the Warden invite Harriet to return to Shrewsbury to investigate the incidents; eventually, Harriet calls in Lord Peter as well.

The mystery is certainly intriguing, but what really speaks to me about *Gaudy Night* is its investigation into different ideas of marriage and of woman's place in the world. The vicious anonymous letters are directed against the female dons (who are necessarily unmarried, a requirement at the time), and cause great debates among them. As Harriet struggles to discover who the anonymous letter writer is, she also struggles to figure out how to maintain her sense of independence and of self in the face of her growing love for Peter. It's a fascinating debate, as relevant now as it was when *Gaudy Night* was published almost seventy years ago.

Nandakishore Varma says

Lord Peter Wimsey is not the quintessential sleuth. He has a beginning, middle and presumably an end – by which I mean he develops as a character throughout the novels, unlike Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot who resolutely stay as their eccentric selves from their first story to the last. Of course, there is a chronological progression of events; and Poirot actually dies; however as characters they are static. In contrast, we see Wimsey age and mature from a frivolous youth to an idiosyncratic middle-aged man – in the course of which he manages to woo and win the attractive Harriet Vane, the famous mystery author whom he manages to save from the scaffold.

Wimsey and Harriet's troubled love affair is an integral part of many of the novels. She keeps on rejecting his suit, because of her indebtedness to him; according to her, it would be like King Cophetua and the beggar-maid. However, Peter does not have such a holier-than-thou attitude, but he finds it difficult to convince Harriet, more so because of the subdued nature of his wooing. Of course, it is very clear to the reader that in her heart of hearts, she loves him.

Dorothy Sayers had to put a satisfying end to this romance, while keeping her mystery stories ticking: she does a masterful job in this novel. As a mystery, I found it much below par than many of her other novels. However, the important thing here is the love story, which is adeptly handled.

The novel, for much of its part, is driven by Harriet. She attends the 'Gaudy Night' in her old Alma Mater, the Shrewsbury College for Women in Oxford, where she gets a couple of nasty anonymous letters accusing her of getting away with murder. Since this is not all that uncommon in her life, Harriet does not pay much attention: but things take a serious turn when nasty things begin happening at Shrewsbury. A 'Poison Pen' is at work: worse still, the same person is behaving as a poltergeist, destroying property and writing obscene graffiti. The college's reputation is targeted. The Dean and company do not want to call in the police, being frightened of the scandal it may create. Harriet is roped in as the investigator, later on joined by Wimsey, who as usual does an efficient job. During the course of the investigation, Harriet finally admits her feelings for Peter, and the story ends in a highly satisfying manner with the lovers locked in the traditional kiss.

The novel is overlong and rambling: and since there is no murder, tends to get repetitive with the atrocities committed by the miscreant. There are so many characters that one loses track sometimes. However, Sayers has done a fantastic job of creating the atmosphere of academe and the struggles felt by the women of early twentieth century, caught between the pleasures of the intellect and the demands of the flesh. In fact, the mystery itself centres on this dichotomy and the solution of it suddenly provides Harriet with the "Aha!" reaction with regard to her own confused feelings. The underplayed British humour is also there, very enjoyable as with any English novelist (Agatha Christie, P. G. Wodehouse) while describing love-struck youths behaving like imbeciles.

I found that unlike her other mysteries, this one was best if taken at a slow pace, like a lazy Saturday afternoon on the university grounds.

Review also on my [BLOG](#) .

Ana Lopes says

Oh, my GOD, Dorothy L. Sayers is quite the snob! 2011 has been Mystery Year, it being when I started officially working as an attorney and having to read just to be entertained and this piece of crap made me want to swear off British whodunits forever. Luckily, Dame Agatha and Ngaio Marsh still deliver.

The truth is, I like my mysteries to be about murders and this fricking bore was a crappy "who sent those ghastly, tasteless anonymous letters" affair. No murders about, and by page 20 I was ready for the main character to be murdered in the bloodiest fashion imaginable.

Sarah Funke Donovan says

Are you in love with dashing, fastidious, brilliant, Bach-performing, manuscript-collecting, sonnet-writing, puzzle-solving, Dickens-quoting, cricket-playing, fabulously wealthy, well-traveled, aristocratic detectives? Then this is the book for you...

Although this is really the third book in the Harriet Vane/Lord Peter Wimsey series (after *Strong Poison* and *Have His Carcase*), it is my favorite. Anyone who has been to Oxford will appreciate the detailed descriptions. Anyone who has ever been a woman trying to reconcile feminist values of individuality and self-fulfillment with Christian values of sacrifice and relationality will sympathize with Harriet.

Fans sometimes accuse Harriet of being less interesting than Lord Peter, but then introverted intuitive thinking types are often dismissed so unceremoniously. I, at least, find that Harriet voices what troubles my own head. So in a somewhat egoistical way, I find Harriet very interesting. :)

James says

Book Review

4 of 5 stars to *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy L. Sayers, a strong and talented writer of detective mysteries in their Golden Age of publication. This was truly an excellent book. Upon finishing my third year at college, I'd taken all the required courses and a variety of electives to complete my double majors. My advisors and professors, knowing I had an affinity for reading and writing mystery stories, encouraged me to do an independent study on this era of literature; but they also told me I wouldn't be allowed to select any of the books I had to read. She would pick two per month for me to read and discuss. And this was one of the very first ones... she was a big Dorothy Sayers fan and thought this was the author's most popular book. Despite it being in the middle of a series, which I severely dislike, I read it without enjoying the prior installments. And it turned out OK.

Though it's hailed as a Lord Peter Wimsey book, it's really about Harriet Vane: young wife accused and jailed for murdering her husband; but she's been released when Wimsey proves her innocence. And they begin their own little flirtation and romance. Harriet goes on to be a writer and plans to visit her alma mater,

a women's college in the 1930s... what an intriguing concept. Full of some feminism, some mystery, some romance, some education... I loved it, even tho at times it was a little too "eyes slanted down one's nose" for my taste.

The writing is fantastic. The mystery is complex. And it's more about proving false clues, sometimes revisiting them, but always applying sound logic. Sayers helped pave the way for many future female authors of detective stories. Christie is still my preference, but I thoroughly enjoyed Sayers' approach and character-creation. If you enjoy 75+ year old stories, give this one a chance. It's really quite psychological and introspective.

About Me

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at <https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by. *Note:* All written content is my original creation and copyrighted to me, but the graphics and images were linked from other sites and belong to them. Many thanks to their original creators.

David says

What *is* the deal with lady detective fiction writers? Why create a brilliant, memorable central female protagonist, totally capable of bringing *teh awesome*, only to undermine her by having her mope around after some overbred aristocratic prat? Case in point: that whole Havers-Linley dynamic would be infinitely healthier had detective Havers given pompous-assed golden boy Linley a good kick in the yarbles the very first time he tried to pull the whole tired aristo-boy superiority trick to put her in her place. Given the choice between Havers and Linley, I know who I'd want to have my back, and it wouldn't be the effete aristocrat, no matter how hard Elizabeth George tries to protray him as a sensitive, noble, brilliant soul. But it's Havers I feel sorry for – she really deserves better.*

If you believe, as I do, that George's apparent infatuation with her idealized aristocrat ultimately weakens the Havers-Linley stories, then what to make of the hero-worship that permeates the entire Peter Wimsey series? After all, isn't Harriet Vane just an obvious stand-in for her creator, making Lord Peter nothing more than a vehicle for the vicarious fulfilment of Dorothy L. Sayers's own romantic fantasies? Or, to use the terms I just recently learned from the infinitely amusing (but beware, it's a complete timesuck) "Television Tropes and Idioms" website, isn't Peter just the quintessential example of the Blue Blood trope, in response to Harriet's Author Avatar?

Well, no. Not really. Although Harriet Vane surely reflects her creator to some degree (something Sayers vigorously denied), it would be reductive to regard the character as nothing more than an author avatar. Sayers's personal life was actually quite romantically adventurous, though this was not generally known during her lifetime. More importantly, Dorothy L. Sayers was smart as all get out (when she translated Dante, she respected that *terza rima***, not like some wusses one could mention – yeah, I'm talking about you, Professor Ciardi). Any way you look at it, Harriet Vane rocks (out loud, and on lingonberry toast). And while I personally find it hard to take Lord Peter seriously, at least he has the virtue of being vaguely amusing, and nowhere near the kind of pompous ass that Inspector Linley manages to be.

“Gaudy Night” is my favorite of all the Harriet/Peter books. There’s no murder, but the stakes are high, nonetheless. Poison pen letters and obscene effigies are being used to target the female scholars of a prestigious Oxford college. Sayers’s depiction of the mounting fear and disruption, and of the emotions swirling beneath the veneer of academic rationalism, is riveting. Lord Peter is relatively scarce, so Harriet is center stage for most of the story. It’s a neat story, expertly told, with that irresistible Oxford setting. You can appreciate it without knowing anything about campanology or mithridatism. And if you do happen to care about the trajectory of the Harriet-Peter relationship, then the ending of “Gaudy Night” will surely warm the cockles of your sentimental heart. This is Dorothy L. Sayers at her best.

*: EG is not the only authoress to consign her sleuth-heroine to an unsatisfying emotional limbo. Consider Jacqueline Winspear, creator of the delightful Maisie Dobbs series. In five or six meticulously researched, well-written, generally tightly-constructed stories, Ms Winspear tracks the exploits of her charming, plucky protagonist Maisie during World War I and the decade immediately following. Despite the odd lapse (placement of the telling historical detail is sometimes a little heavy-handed, the high-minded purity of motivation of Maisie and her friends can be excessive at times), Ms Winspear delivers the goods – stories in the series are reliably entertaining. But across a timespan of 15 years, the heroine is allowed little more than the occasional chaste peck on the cheek; for the decade or so after the end of the war the only release outlet for her emotional energy was through occasional visits to her irreversibly shell-shocked sweetheart (mercifully killed off in the fourth or fifth book). The unremitting bleakness of the emotional landscape Ms Winspear imagines for her protagonist is really starting to get me down, though I understand she may be making a point about life after the Great War for women in Maisie’s demographic cohort.

**: Actually, the Sayers translation is not particularly readable, but I give her points for effort.

TVTropes has much to say about Lord Peter, some of it quite penetrating:
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php...>

Jason Koivu says

Sayers writes herself into her series and then takes us on a trip to her alma mater. *Gaudy Night* is a slow and easy look at university life at an all-girls college in 1930s Oxford. Not your typical whodunnit, this is an enjoyable sojourn into academia that takes its time and lets the story and characters breathe.

Susan says

This year I finally decided to read all of the Lord Peter Wimsey novels. I have read the first few many times, but, for whatever reason, I never continued the series. I have always heard that “Gaudy Night” was her best novel and so I was really intrigued to read this book and was interested to see how the character of Harriet Vane would develop. Indeed, Harriet is the central character in this novel, which sees her returning to Oxford, to attend the Shrewsbury Gaudy, after being invited by a friend who was about to go abroad for an operation.

Harriet always loved her time at Oxford, but was nervous about returning, especially after events covered in

a previous book, where she was accused of killing a former lover. Gathering her courage, Harriet decides to go and actually enjoys her time there, although it is marred when she discovers an anonymous note which is less than flattering. Back in London she receives a letter from the Dean, inviting her to the opening of a new library wing and mentioning that the college has had an outbreak of a poltergeist and a poison pen writer; suggesting that Harriet's own note was not a one off.

When Harriet returns to the cloistered world of academia and the women's college she previously studied at, it is clear that things are not well. Someone is mischief making and, before long, Harriet wishes she could consult Peter – who is away in Europe, dealing with the difficult political situation unravelling abroad. This novel reminded me a little of Nicholas Blake's, "Malice in Wonderland," which also involves a prankster (although set in an early holiday camp, rather than a fictitious Oxford college), whose tricks gradually gets more and more out of hand. Like this, that novel is set in the 1930's, with the threat of war as an undercurrent and, like this, the novel also features crimes which are not the usual murders and mayhem, but are unpleasant nonetheless.

Although this is not a traditional murder mystery, I found this a really riveting read. I thought the insight into how women's education was viewed between the wars very interesting; either the women were seen as unnatural or they were viewed with a benign tolerance. Likewise, this is the novel where the relationship between Harriet and Peter changes, which is obviously especially interesting if you have followed the books in order. I enjoyed meeting the female scholars and other characters, including Peter's nephew. I also loved the Oxford setting and thought it worked really well. A really interesting read and, if not my favourite of the books so far, certainly among the best.

Meredith Holley says

A couple of years ago I thought (as a gesture to God saying something like, "Hey, we don't disagree about everything and anyway what do I know about life?") that I would start going to a certain church where the pastor was an ex-football star. When I say it now it doesn't sound like a very good idea, but I did a lot of things at that time that sound stupid now. Sometimes it's better to go with what you know, even if it's very little. I say all of this because the ultimate falling-out I had with the pastor of that church reflects the central conflict of the great and wonderful mystery story, *Gaudy Night*, so I'm going to use this review as a venue to air my grievances, which will hopefully be entertaining enough that you can bear with me. In fact, this book brings up a couple of stories I have about churches, so I should probably say as a disclaimer that *Gaudy Night* is not religious at all in its topic, but deals mostly with the role of women in society. That just happens to be something about which I tend to get pissed off at churches.

Rather than preaching topically, this football pastor had decided that the entire church (which may not be fully of mega-church size, but is by no means small) would read through the Bible together in a year, like you do, and he would pull the sermons from our reading assignments. On Mother's Day, we had just finished the book of Esther, so I was hopeful. There are a lot of troubling things about Esther, but also some really fascinating things. Also, it's about a woman, so there are many good ways you can go with that. Nope. I should have known he would skip Esther entirely only to pick a random section from Judges to illustrate his spiritual message, which, as far as I could tell, was that he really liked when his mom would scratch his back before bedtime when he was in high school, so women shouldn't work because they're silly and it takes away time they could devote to scratching their family's backs. As the sermon went on, I felt sure there would be some kind of uprising in the congregation. I was ready to get out my stash of pitchforks and torches

and burn something down, but I didn't want to leave because I might miss the end of his message where I hoped he would reveal that he was faking us all out to prove some point or another. His passion about the message culminated when he pulled out a quote from Some Woman, who is reputed to have said, "If all women CEOs quit their jobs, men could feed their families." I looked around, hoping to see the scores of other women in the audience who would be equally shocked and appalled rushing for the door, when suddenly there was cheering and a woman in the back of the church yelled, "AMEN!" I don't think I've ever felt so betrayed in my life.

The redemptive "Psych!" never came, so I drove home in a rage, pulled my copy of Backlash off its shelf, wrote a letter of complaint to the pastor in its inside cover, drove back to the church, and slammed it on the desk in his empty office. He never acknowledged the incident.

I wish, at this point, I had read the book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, so that I could give more scholarly opinions about *Gaudy Night*. From what I know of that line of analysis, Dorothy Sayers's villain in this novel, the "poisen-pen" haunting the women of Oxford, is along the lines of the 19th century *Madwoman* (think *Jane Eyre*). She characterizes female sexuality, but also a loathing of female sexuality as castrating and destructive, so she is this horrifying repressed monster (*Grendel's Mother*, maybe?). In *Gaudy Night* this character terrorizes the cloistered professors in the women's college at Oxford. It really makes for a delightful read! Sayers presents the varied personalities of the dons and students of the university with a lot of color and flair. The fun and thoughtful discussion Dorothy Sayers presents in *Gaudy Night* on the topic of women being intelligent humans in their own right was vindicating and cathartic for me to read. She illustrates both the freedom and the shame that successful women feel, and does it in this funny, charming, British way that I adore. Harriet Vane is wonderful! Sayers doesn't pretend that all women are in favor of having rights, nor does she pretend that we are all a bunch of catty bitches. Some characters do become savage in their hatred of independent women, and those independent women become shrill in their suspicion of one another's virginity or sexuality. Sayers shows these aspects as momentary weaknesses, however, which are secondary to the overall trust and regard that the women show each other. They are not caricatures, but have their own flaws and charms. I'm making this sound like the whole story is purposeful critical analysis, which it may be, but it definitely comes off as natural within the overall mystery story. I don't even usually like mysteries, and I don't have a sense of suspense, so it is surprising how much I love this book, but that's probably why the social aspect was more striking to me.

I'm not fully with her in her use of classical quotations, which I take as an Oxford thing. Lord Peter Whimsey makes his appearance to be useful, charming, and supplicating. He doesn't appear to be an overly realistic character (maybe too determinedly glad that Harriet is as smart as she is?), but I am in favor of wonderful authors writing people as they wish them to be, if not as they are – especially in the area of gender relations. Also, I love the way Sayers explores how women think of themselves. It would have been an unnecessary distraction to go into what men think of us. It was much more devastating to hear the woman shout "Amen!" at the back of that church, than to hear the male pastor go on about how women are good at scratching backs – and only that. Anyway, I think I've decided that maybe the use of classical quotations has to do with the battle of wits between Whimsey and Harriet, showing the equality of their intelligence and education. I like that, even though it was frustrating for my more pedestrian brain. I think I needed the Norton edition.

I was given this book at a "housewarming shower", held for me by a really wonderful woman, who is the pastor of a subsequent church I attended. "Shower" because I am over 25 and unmarried, and it is presumed that I would be sad that I haven't had any wedding/baby showers. Men were uninvited to the event, and the (humorous?) theme of the "shower" was to give me books I would hate. This made my friends who came a little stressed out because they know how much I love books, so they felt all this pressure (contrary to the

theme) to get me books I would love that I hadn't read yet. Also, to me, shower=bad. Other than stuff on my cat, I think this was the most successful book from that evening, and it actually makes all of the uncomfortable female judgment worth it. I kind of love that this book was given to me in this really awkward event that only women were allowed to come to. Even though the evening was pretty fun, and I really do love most of the women who came, the concept of the shower said so much about my "failure" in being an independent, educated woman. This book has so much to say to the contrary. I love irony.

Jaline says

Published in 1936, this 12th novel in the Lord Peter Wimsey Series is a big story. Dorothy L. Sayers created an entire women's college (called Shrewsbury) in the large complex known as Oxford University. It is near an associate college called Queen's and also near Balliol College, which is where Lord Peter Wimsey attended his university years. With Oxford University composed of 38 colleges and 6 Permanent Private Halls, it is not difficult to imagine Ms Sayers' invention taking its place easily among the others.

Harriet Vane is invited to her class reunion, known as a Gaudy. She has not gone before but decides to do so this time in answer to pleas from some of her former classmates. She surprises herself by enjoying the time away from home and renewing relations with various dons, Fellows, and classmates. At the end of Gaudy night, she finds an offensive drawing on the grounds of the Quad. She also finds an ominous note in the rolled-up sleeve of her gown.

When she returns home, she dives back in to writing her most recent novel, which has been giving her trouble. Then, she receives a letter from the Dean of Shrewsbury, Miss Martin, who tells her about some ominous incidents that have been occurring since Gaudy Night. Poison Pen notes, things set on fire, random vandalism, and so forth. The Dean asks if Harriet Vane has any idea what it might be about.

Harriet responds that she will return to the College and see if she can do anything to help.

This is where we receive a taste of academic life that would be nostalgic for those who had gone to University, and like entering a new and fascinating world for those who had not gone to University. The discussions cover the gamut from literary topics to history to philosophy and science. I was obliged to search out many topics and references on the computer and had some great adventures.

Both a reminiscence and reminder for some people as much as it is a new adventure for others - yet underlying the academia, we have this mystery – who is causing all the turmoil and terrors – and why? The focus seems to be the Seniors Common Room, so even the Dean, Treasurer, Warden, Bursar, and other dons and Fellows in the group are under suspicion. Gradually, as further incidents occur, Harriet is able to start eliminating suspects based on cast-iron alibis, but it is a slow and laborious process.

Lord Peter is away on the continent – Rome and Warsaw – and as Harriet Vane progresses in her investigations, she documents the details in a notebook. However, a couple of attempts to hurt or kill people are causing her to wonder if she is equal to the task of finding this person before it's too late. After a few more frightening incidents, Harriet decides she can't do this alone and persuades the Dean to allow her to contact her "detecting friend" for help.

I love it when these books include both Lord Peter and Harriet Vane. Their chemistry is fascinating and over the five years of their acquaintance, their individual personal growth is most closely observed when they are

working on a mystery together.

This book is not a fluff piece or even close to being a ‘cozy’ mystery or ‘classic’ mystery for that matter. This book stretched and expanded my mind. Dorothy L. Sayers is in a class of her own – intellectually, she doesn’t hold back. Psychologically and even scientifically, she is well ahead of the pack in both what she knows and how she writes.

Until I lost my bookmarks and annotations, I was going to end this review with a brilliant quote about women that made me question: how far have we travelled really with feminism? Keeping in mind that this book was written 83 years ago, the answer is: not very far. Or – maybe Dorothy L. Sayers and her own set of classmates were simply decades ahead of the rest of the world.
