

Mrs Malory Disposes: Some Problems of an Amateur Detective

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INTRODUCTION

The following brief extract from *Any Man's Death* (2009) gives a fair notion of one of Hazel Holt's Sheila Malory stories. The death from mushroom poisoning of village managing power, retired district nurse Annie, has been put down as accidental. Sheila, however, has discovered that Annie had used her access to people's homes to gain information which gave her a hold over them. While on an outing to Dulverton, Sheila and her great friend Rosemary catch sight of a man from the village in a cafe 'in earnest conversation with a young woman':

'I suppose she might have been a colleague,' I said doubtfully,

'A young woman? And here in Dulverton? I don't think so.'

'I suppose not.'

'We could go in and have our cream tea there,' Rosemary suggested.

'Goodness, no! It would be too embarrassing – that is, if there's anything ... well, you know ... Anyway, it's nothing to do with us.'

'Perhaps she's Lewis's secret. Was he one of those on Annie's list?'

'Well, yes, he was.'

'There you are, then.' She turned to look back at the café. 'Hang on a minute, they're coming out. Pretend to be looking in the shop window!'

Lewis and the girl stood for a moment outside the café, then he put his arm round her shoulder and they moved off in the other direction.

'Well!' Rosemary said. 'Did you see that? Certainly not a colleague. She couldn't be more than twenty and she was really pretty.'

'Yes. Very pretty. But there could be some perfectly innocent explanation.'

'There could,' Rosemary agreed, 'but I prefer to think the worst.'

I can't deny that our cream tea (warm, freshly baked scones, proper strawberry jam and plenty of cream), excellent in itself, had an added dimension as we discussed what we had seen.

That, I hope, conveys something of the flavour of Hazel Holt's style, reliant rather on conversation than on description or reflection. There's a good deal of chatting, there's a lot of nice homemade food; and there are of course the animals: two dogs, plus the elegant and exacting Siamese cat Foss:

He purred for a while, and then impatiently wriggled free and headed for the kitchen, where he sat expectantly gazing at the fridge door. I scooped some cat food out of an opened tin [...] and put the dish down in front of him. He sniffed at it briefly, looked at me with scorn and incredulity and began, deliberately, to make scraping motions with his paw, before turning and walking indignantly away.

Foss, I understand, was the only character to be drawn from life.

But what else in crime fiction can be drawn from life? And how can an author achieve in her /his readers that 'suspension of disbelief' so necessary to carry them along in an acceptance of an imagined but realistically portrayed world and the dire crimes that it encompasses?

So when I say 'some problems of an amateur detective', please understand by this 'some problems for the crime fiction author who decides to make her / his detective an amateur'. I shall outline some alternative possibilities and their attendant problems, and then examine the expedients by which the author can make her amateur detective credible. I plan to touch lightly on some of my more admired crime writers and their detectives

in order to bring out the strategies available to Hazel Holt; I shall then examine some of the devices she used with reference to a couple of her Taviscombe novels, and also to two set in academia: Oxford, and a small college in the USA.

THE PROBLEM OF THE CAREER POLICEMAN

You can see why an author might choose to avoid a policeman or woman as hero: brilliant though the police novel may be, the pitfalls about rank and procedure, investigation methods and the handling of evidence, computerisation and technologies, offer all too many traps for a writer lacking specialist and up-to-date knowledge of the milieu. Of the realistic police procedural novel, I shall say nothing, as I never read them – far too gritty for my taste. Of the police non-procedural (as it might be termed) I shall single out the marvellous books of the late lamented Reginald Hill. Never was a more curious pair of policemen than Dalziel and Pascoe, nor so erudite a writer as Hill. I pride myself on my vocabulary, but at least once in — every Hill book, I find myself flying to the dictionary and adding another word to my hoard. Inspector Morse is another such: not a terribly police-ish policeman, and not too keen on the filing, record-keeping and painstaking collaboration that makes up a real investigation. Morse is a maverick, and it is a very good thing that he has Sergeant Lewis at his side. P. D. James makes Adam Dalgliesh not only a sensitive and insightful person, but actually a published poet, writer of well-regarded slender volumes of verse. In what one can't help but feel is somewhat of a copy-cat ploy, Susan Hill's Simon Serrailler is a notably good – indeed, an exhibited – artist. This goes right back to authors such as Michael Innes and his John Appleby, reacting against the laughably dim yokelish policemen of many early C20 crime novels. In short, the instinctive response of the literary crime writer is to stress the policeman-hero as a person of culture and learning; and touch only lightly on the background of tedious door-to-door enquiries and investigative routine.

THE PROBLEM OF THE SCIENTIFIC SPECIALIST

Related to the police novel are the books that centre upon a protagonist specialising in a professional technique or skill ancillary to police work. We might think of *Silent Witness* on TV, and the Kay Scarpetta novels of Patricia Cornwell. Scarpetta is (for several books) the Chief Medical Examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia before becoming a consulting forensic pathologist in private practice. Again, it is obvious (a) that lots of technical knowledge is required on the author's part, and (b) that actually forensic pathologists in the real world don't have the substantial involvement with witnesses and investigators that these series would have us accept. As for *Silent Witness*, with Amanda Burton playing pathologist Sam Ryan – doesn't everybody remember Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders parodying it as *Witless Silence*? Enough said, I think. Other forms of specialism include psychology and psychiatry – Gladys Mitchell's long-lasting Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, for example; Alex Delaware, consulting forensic psychologist to the LA Police Department in the series by Jonathan Kellerman. And some of you will recall how a few years ago the BPS welcomed as a speaker Daphne Wright, aka Natasha Cooper, aka N. J. Cooper, the name under which she writes novels featuring Karen Taylor, a forensic psychologist from the Isle of Wight.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Another option available to the would-be author is to make the lead character a private detective – a professional one, that is, earning a hard but maybe fairly honest living by the trade. The range is wide: there's the hard-boiled Raymond Chandler school with Philip Marlowe walking the mean streets of LA; or Reginald Hill, again, whose Joe Sixsmith walks the not quite so mean streets of Luton, with Aunt Mirabelle reminding him not to miss his choir rehearsals and his concern for his cat Whitey. Joe's about as soft-boiled as they come, yet manages through luck, good nature, and slow thinking-through a problem to get his man in the end. And let's recall some female professional PIs – for example, V. I. Warshawski in Sara Paretsky's Chicago-set series. Vic Warshawski is pretty tough cookie: she's a good street fighter, is adept at karate and well able to handle a

gun. She also holds a degree in law, amply qualifying her to deal with the white-collar crime that forms the starting point of most of the novels. Or there's Cordelia Gray, the central character in two of P. D. James' novels: neither quite as tough nor as well-qualified as VI, but fit enough to survive being thrown down a well; and able to use her unlicensed gun if need be. Another woman against crime is Mma Precious Ramotswe, of Alexander McCall Smith's series about the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency. Being 'traditionally built' she's not so apt as the two I've just mentioned to engage in extreme physical exertion, and the solutions of crimes turn less upon evidence than upon psychological insight. And an outstanding instance of an unusual female PI is Kate Shackleton, First World War widow and proprietor of a Leeds detective agency, whose creator Frances Brody convincingly conveys the feel of life and society in the great textile manufacturing area in the 1920s.

THE PROBLEM OF THE RELATED PROFESSIONAL

I can't think of a good term to use for this concept: what I have in mind is, not a person who is professionally ancillary to the police, but one whose work brings them into frequent contact with crime and the police – for example, journalists and lawyers. Peter Bartram's 'Crampton of the Chronicle' series, set in 1960s Brighton, is a good instance; or the Daisy Dalrymple books, by Carola Dunn. Daisy's magazine commissions give the excuse for varied backgrounds from the middle to upper echelons of 1920s English society, and she stumbles over or is called in to solve a variety of crimes. Antonia Fraser's Jemima Shore is an investigative reporter of a more serious kind. Among lawyers, Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason stands out (especially to those of my generation for whom the office-cum-courtroom series came early in our TV viewing lives): 'You're a better detective than you are a lawyer. When you turn your mind to the solution of a crime, you ferret out the truth' says his adversary, perpetually defeated District Attorney Hamilton Burger (we always used to wonder why he didn't just give up and retire!). Gardner himself was a lawyer turned pulp fiction author, and knew what he was talking about.

THE PROBLEM OF THE CRIMINAL DETECTIVE

The more hard-boiled the (usually male) detective is, or the more of a shyster the lawyer is, the closer he becomes to being an actual criminal. G. K. Chesterton was an earlier proponent of this – not Father Brown himself, but his associate Flambeau: a 'colossus of crime ... a Gascon of gigantic stature and bodily daring ... his real crimes were chiefly those of ingenious and wholesale robbery. But each of his thefts was almost a new sin, and would make a story by itself.' Of course, Father Brown converts him to a life of good deeds and crime-fighting, and he ends up a reformed character. At the humorous end of this spectrum are Simon Brett's Mrs Pargeter mysteries. Melita Pargeter's late husband – who came from 'the upper echelon of criminals' – has certainly taught her a trick or two, and she's also able to call upon his shady associates when help is needed in the solving of mysteries.

How unlike, you are thinking, all this is to the home life of our own dear Mrs Malory – well, yes indeed! But in case there are a few who don't know that much about Hazel Holt's lady detective, here's a brief sketch of her life and times.

SHEILA MALORY

Sheila Malory was born Sheila Prior, in the mid 1930s (because she goes up to Oxford as a student in the early 1950s). Her father was a vicar in the fictional Somerset town of Taviscombe (the name borrowed from Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love* as the location of the Eagle House Hotel). Taviscombe seems to be Minehead with touches of Torquay. The vicar father is long dead when we first meet Sheila (in *Gone Away*, published 1989), and only a couple of years previously her invalid mother and her husband Peter have also both died within months of each other. So Sheila, widowed after a very happy marriage, is coming to terms with a new mode of life. Her only child Michael is a student at Oxford; and as the 21 novels proceed, he adopts his

father's profession of solicitor, and settles down in Taviscombe with the same legal firm; he eventually marries and has children. Most of the books are set in Taviscombe, though there are occasional forays elsewhere: for example, to Oxford (*The Cruellest Month*), and even to a small college in the USA (*Murder on Campus*). The settings of the individual books are intimately related to small town life: an arts centre, a charity shop, the local vets' practice, the doctors' surgery, the stables. Or Sheila gets involved in such activities as genealogical research, or helping compile the history of a nearby village, or running an arts festival, and so on. Her Oxford degree was in English, and we learn that she has written a number of articles and books on lesser-known Victorian authors. From all this I think it's clear that Sheila Malory could not be more of a stranger to police work, forensic expertise, or crime in any way, shape or form whatsoever.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PURE AMATEUR

So if your detective is to be purely an amateur, a non-professional outsider to the criminal world, how can s/he ever get the opportunity, the information, the access to the crime scene, the witness and the suspects? This is an impasse often faced by Simon Brett's Fethering detective duo: Carole Seddon, retired civil servant and stickler for correctness, and her neighbour, warm, easy-going, slightly dippy Jude Nichols.

'It is frustrating', Carole observed, not for the first time, 'knowing that [the police] have all kinds of information at their fingertips, and we don't have access to it.'

'Murder is their job', Jude pointed out. 'With us it's really only a casual interest.'

'Like bridge and line-dancing and amateur dramatics and all those other things recommended for the retired to fill their lives with.'

The charm and humour of these books lies in the relationship between the two, as Jude's warm-heartedness very very gradually thaws Carole's reserved and uptight personality. The pair of them tackle their mysteries through their local contacts (the 'dog walkers' Mafia on Fethering beach, Jude's New Age friends, and the varied denizens of the seaside resort)..

The less like a professional detective the protagonist is and the more she's a little old lady or middle-aged housewife or retiree, the more ingenious (or far-fetched) must be the author's methods in getting her access to the crime, the criminals and the means of investigating. This is precisely the difficulty that Hazel Holt faces in creating so Pymmish a heroine as Sheila Malory.

SOLUTION 1: THE FRIENDLY POLICEMAN

Every amateur's burden of isolation and non-access is greatly lightened by having one of these. Let's look no further than Lord Peter Wimsey: Detective Inspector Charles Parker (and his unnamed minions) do the boring legwork and provide the background information from official records without which Wimsey's flights of fantasy and insight would fall to the ground. Parker is always on hand to let Wimsey view a crime scene or to share the results of a forensic report, when necessary. Other instances are Daisy Dalrymple, who marries her tame policeman; while Kate Shackleton's adoptive father is a senior member of the Yorkshire police force.

Hazel Holt exploits this opportunity too. Her best friend Rosemary's daughter is married to Inspector Roger Eliot. Holt is careful not to make Sheila expect too much from him by way of inside information, but there's no denying that it makes it easier for her to let him know some item that has come to her notice via the gossip-vine of Taviscombe, or casually extract a fact or two from him when she's being interviewed. Sometimes the two of them engage in a good deal of cosy speculation about suspects and motives. Here Sheila and Roger Eliot discuss the marriage of victim Adrian Palgrave, literary celebrity. Roger asks:

'Tell me, were he and Enid a happily married couple?'

'Well, I can't say that that's the first description that would come to mind. It was more complex than that. She adored him and was immensely proud of being his wife. She loved being Mrs Palgrave, especially when he became quite famous.'

‘And what about him?’

‘Well, you’ve seen her; Rosemary and I rather meanly call her the Hobbit. He certainly didn’t marry her for her looks, and she’s quite a bit older than he is. But she’s a basically tiresome woman, very full of herself and rather ponderous. The sort of person who finishes off every single sentence, if you know what I mean.’

‘I know just what you mean.’

‘But she does have a lot of money – her father left her quite a bit of property in Manchester, I think it was – and we all assumed that was what he saw in her.’

‘Do you think he had other female interests?’

‘Rumour says so, though there have been no positive sightings, as it were. Everyone is Taviscombe being so beady-eyed, we imagine it must all go on in London.’

It ends with Roger asking Sheila to keep an eye on all the people concerned in the case:

‘... You know the undercurrents and are aware of the things they don’t say! And, most important, you have a writer’s curiosity and observation. ... That sort of evaluation [of character] is something you’re very good at; I’ve always liked that in your books of criticism. I’ve often thought you ought to write a novel.’ (*An Uncertain Death*, 1993 [*US Mrs Malory and the Festival Murder*, 2010] pp. 55-56)

For Roger Eliot is a great fan of Victorian novels (something Sheila’s a bit surprised by when she initially encounters him in the first book), and he has of course read her critical discussions of Gaskell, Yonge and Oliphant. Roger is finally promoted to higher duties, and the inspector role passes to Bob Morris. He’s a local lad whose father used to be Sheila’s gardener, so she’s known him from a child: networking is nothing new in Taviscombe, and she continues to enjoy good relationships with the police.

SOLUTION 2: THE AMATEUR AS CONSULTANT

In many a detective novel of the Golden Age, the amateur is so well-known to the police (in a good way, I hasten to say) that he is called in as a consultant and special adviser. This is often the role of my own favourite hero, the delightful Mr Albert Campion, Margery Allingham’s creation. One has to admit that on his first appearance, in *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929), Mr Campion has a tendency to shadiness, but he soon loses this, becoming a Universal Uncle and Deputy Adventurer. Some of his exploits are purely private and familial, but others entail a close association with the police: initially with the low-spirited Superintendent Stanislaus Oates, later with that human dynamo Chief Inspector Charlie Luke.

Something of this ‘consultancy’ relationship befalls Sheila Malory in her sojourn in the US. *Murder on Campus*, Hazel’s fifth novel, is set in a college in Wilmot, Pennsylvania (‘a small, private, rather prestigious college’), where Sheila is to spend a semester teaching a course on lesser-known C19 British women writers – Mrs Oliphant, Mary Cholmondeley, and Charlotte M. Yonge. Sheila is visiting at the invitation of her dear friend Linda Kowolski, and she finds that the English Department is riven with feuding between various interest groups. But the first victim isn’t the poisonous professor of English – it’s actually his brother, the almost equally poisonous director of a neighbouring Art Institute, a remarkable example of an ornate private house from the 1880s. In a fine set-piece, Max Loring’s body is discovered in a cedar-lined blanket drawer (where else?), part of the fixtures and fittings of the C19 mansion. The investigating police chief turns out to be a great Shakespeare fan and very simpatico: he asks Sheila to help him, as ‘someone who knows [those involved] but isn’t a suspect; someone like you from outside, who can see things with an unbiased eye.’ He becomes greatly attracted to Sheila in the course of the book, though she makes it plain to him that it can’t lead anywhere.

SOLUTION 3: THE UNRECOGNISED CRIME

This is an excellent way for the amateur to enjoy untrammelled opportunities for investigation: the event that is accepted by all concerned (including the police) as either accidental or otherwise insignificant, and is

only recognised by the determined sleuth as a crime to be enquired into. It can be a death that passes as accident or is deemed to be suicide; or some other wrongdoing like fraud or blackmail. The perceptive amateur knows that something is wrong, and deploys her forces and contacts to ferret out the truth.

Hazel Holt employed this strategy several times, notably in her Oxford-set novel *The Cruellest Month*. Sheila is doing research in the Bodleian, staying for the time with an old university friend whose son Tony is a librarian there. An elderly woman has just died in a small reading room, supposedly because she pulled a heavy bookcase down upon herself – an accidental death. But one or two features have made Tony suspicious, and he asks Sheila to help him investigate. Like most of Hazel Holt's victims, the woman is a much disliked character whom various people have good reason to want dead. Some of these reasons go back a very long way, to the Second World War and its immediate aftermath, so Sheila has to delve down into her own and others' memories, and also into diaries and letters, to identify the possible motivations and then gradually exclude one possibility after another.

But this description probably makes it sound as if Sheila acts according to strict logic, which is not universally the case. One suspect she tricks into an admission of what she had done (stealing an artefact from an archaeological site, which was the hold the dead woman had over her) and then excludes her on the basis of a deep instinctual feeling that however much the suspect might have hated the victim, she was nevertheless incapable of murdering her. And another potential suspect, the elderly academic Fitz, she excitedly accuses on the sole basis of a very strong motive, but without having checked out whether he had any actual opportunity. He enumerates his excellent alibi (a meeting at All Souls with two professors and a Dean) and listens coldly to her stammered apology that she had been carried away by her theory and didn't think:

'That is what I have been complaining about. ... You do not think. You go plunging about in a mindless way, blundering through people's lives with no thought for those very feelings that you are so anxious to lay claim to yourself. You open up barely healed wounds, challenge the memory to face things that have been carefully hidden away for nearly a lifetime – and all for what? So that you can indulge yourself with a sort of game, a superior kind of acrostic, so that you can fancy yourself cleverer than your fellow creatures by reason of your *deductions*. You are despicable.' (p. 165).

And in revenge Fitz goes on to divulge the truth about a brilliant young man whom the undergraduate Sheila loved and admired, and who she fully believed loved her in return. It was the great romance of her youth, ending only with the young man's tragic early death. This is all revealed as a sham: naïve little Sheila never realised that Rupert's 'elaborate phrases ... and chaste kisses' were designed to keep her in play as an expedient 'girlfriend' to mask the homosexual relationship between Rupert and Fitz. This powerful scene is one of the darkest in Hazel Holt's works, a striking instance of a revelation that affects the narrator's entire self-image.

SOLUTION 4: THE UNRECOGNISED CRIME – AND THE UNDISCLOSED CRIMINAL

In the American novel, *Death on Campus*, there is a most ingenious twist on 'only the amateur realises that a crime has been committed'. As I explained earlier, the first crime in that book is clear beyond any doubt: a body does not get itself, shot, into a cedarwood linen drawer by any form of accident. Since there's no gun, it's not suicide. Max Loring was universally disliked, so there are ample suspects, one of them being his very own brother, the English professor Carl. The two had quarrelled bitterly over a family inheritance, and Carl, desperate for money, felt cheated by his brother. But then Carl is found stabbed in the department commons room, and it looks for a time as if Sheila's dear friend and hostess Linda might be the guilty one here, since horrible Carl had a hold over her. Or did the same person kill both brothers? Sheila naturally wishes to clear Linda, and is in great difficulty about how frank she can be with Mike, the nice Shakespeare-loving policeman. Then a young woman student with a very serious grievance against dead professor Carl kills herself, leaving an ambiguously worded suicide note:

‘It was only justice. When I looked down and saw him lying there I was so glad.’

So it seems that it was she who killed Carl, and the police find that Carl had strong personal, financial and reputational motives for killing his brother Max. Nice and tidy: A is killed by B, B is killed by C, and C commits suicide. Finito.

‘Yes,’ I said slowly, ‘it does seem to be the only explanation.’

Policeman Mike is pretty happy, and so is Sheila – until she chances to find an item dropped by Linda’s sister Anna at the scene of Carl’s death. When confronted with this, Anna confesses to killing first Max (because his cowardice when an officer in Vietnam had caused her brother’s death) and then Carl, because he realised she killed Max.

Sheila decides that no good can come of revealing this: the police have closed both cases, and Linda would be devastated to learn the truth. Anna drives off, and is killed in what Sheila is fairly sure is a self-sought car crash. Sheila cannot make up her mind whether or not to tell policeman Mike that Anna was doubly guilty. But chance decides: in the airport, about to fly home, she phones the police office but Mike is away, and she is not willing to leave a verbal message with a stranger.

A similar scenario is played out at the end of the mushroom poisoning novel, *Any Man’s Death*, from which I quoted earlier. Annie’s death is accepted on all hands as accidental; Sheila’s investigations have revealed the various secret holds that the dead woman had over the other villagers, but no-one can be identified as the murderer. Even her loyal Watson Rosemary urges Sheila to take things as they seem to be. But at the very last minute Sheila finds a book about the precise type of mushroom used in the poisoning, and confronts the owner. This is old school friend Rachel, much admired by Sheila. Her motive was to prevent Annie revealing that Rachel’s doctor father had eased away his terminally ill wife. Rachel, fully aware of the enormity of what she has done, plans to devote the rest of her life to helping in a refugee camp in the Sudan; Sheila reluctantly agrees not to expose her.

‘I hope all goes well for you,’ I said stiffly.

Please, Sheila,’ Rachel said, ‘please understand.’

‘I do understand – it’s just that I don’t approve.’ I got rather unsteadily to my feet.

‘So you won’t be staying to lunch? I can promise you – *no* mushrooms!’

She smiled, and it was the smile of the old Rachel, the one I grew up with, admired for her dash and daring, for her confidence and warmth, and for that special something that so few people have – genuine charm. Reluctantly, I smiled back. At the old Rachel. ‘Goodbye,’ I said, ‘and good luck.’

CONCLUSION

In my title, ‘Mrs Malory Disposes’ you’ll have recognised the echo of *Miss Pym Disposes*. That, of course, has nothing to do with Barbara, but is the title of a deservedly famous crime novel of 1946 by Josephine Tey (that’s an alias), alias also Gordon Daviot, and whose real name was Elizabeth MacKintosh. Under that name she lived quietly in Inverness (and has herself recently featured as a sleuth in the crime novels of Nicola Upson). As Gordon Daviot she composed several very successful plays, and as Josephine Tey she wrote *The Franchise Affair* and the Inspector Grant novels. *Miss Pym Disposes* is a standalone book, of which the main character is a psychologist visiting a women’s physical training college who investigates a crime (accident or murder?). She so ‘disposes’ matters that the seemingly guilty party is not charged with murder but undertakes as a kind of penance a very severe professional setback. This Miss Pym determines with grave consideration and awareness of the great responsibility of her choice; but then a final twist reveals – too late to mend matters – that the guilt lay elsewhere. ‘Disposing’, in fact, is a dangerous business; and Mrs Malory certainly finds it so.