



### About the Author

The Rev. Canon Robert F. Hayman has been a priest for 58 years. He graduated from Princeton University and the General Theological Seminary, and served in the Dioceses of New Jersey, Olympia, and California. He retired as rector of Drumcliffe Parish, County Sligo, Ireland, and he and his wife now live in Seattle.

### About Vintage Voice

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# VINTAGE VOICE



## Unholy Mysteries

By the Rev. Canon Robert Hayman

Detectives in dog collars? Since I have much more time to read for pleasure now that I'm retired after nearly 60 years in ministry — and since recently PBS has provided us with series featuring clergy as crime-solvers like G. K. Chesterton's "Father Brown" and his Anglican counterpart in "Grantchester," Canon Saunders (whose creator, James Runcie, is the son of the late Archbishop of Canterbury) — I've been driven back into my longtime passion for detective novels of all genres. And I've done a lot of thinking about why these novels are so all-consuming for me.

In 1948, W. H. Auden published an essay in Harper's Magazine titled "The Guilty Vicarage," subtitled "Notes on the detective story, by an addict." He wrote: "The typical detective story addict is a doctor or clergyman or scientist or artist, i.e., a fairly successful professional man [sic] with intellectual interests and well read in his field," surely a description that fits us.

What constitutes a mystery novel? P. D. James puts it this way, beginning with a quote from E. M. Forster:

"The king died and then the queen died," is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. ... "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king." This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development.<sup>1</sup>

To which James adds: "Everyone thought the queen had died of grief until they discovered the puncture marks on her throat. That is a murder mystery and it too is capable of high development."

The detective comes in several forms. There is the amateur who helps the police, often annoying them in the process. Agatha Christie's Miss Marple comes to mind, and of course the archetypal amateur, Sherlock Holmes. Another is Dorothy Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey.

Then there is the professional, the private eye: Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe or Agatha Christie's Poirot or, recently, J. K. Rowling's Cormoran Strike.

<sup>1</sup>E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 1927.

Finally, there is a long list of police professionals: Donna Leon's Brunetti, Elizabeth George's Linley, P. D. James' Dalgliesh, Jo Nesbo's Harry Hole, and Georges Simenon's Maigret. Here it is hard to resist quoting T. S. Eliot who wrote, "I never read contemporary fiction — with one exception: the works of Simenon concerned with Inspector Maigret."

The absolute kernel of the mystery novel is the detective, not the crime. Indeed, the crimes become banal. No one reads a Nesbo to learn of another drug overdose in Oslo. We are not likely to peruse Donna Leon to find another body floating in a Venetian canal. Very few readers pick up an Agatha Christie to learn about village life. No, we read Nesbo because we are hooked on Harry Hole, we are addicted to Brunetti, and we are determined to marvel at Miss Marple.

Having made eight trips to Venice — six of which have been since I retired, with a ninth trip coming up in April — it is very familiar territory. I know the Ospedale (hospital) near Brunetti's fictitious office. I recognize the funeral gondolas on the Grand Canal. I even know when the author takes liberties in moving buildings about. After all, the 18th-century Venetian painter Canaletto did the same thing!

Some mystery readers look back to a "golden age," at least in the UK, the period from the 1920s until World War II. These books met a series of expectations: A crime, usually a murder; a closed circle of suspects with motives and opportunities; a closed setting such as a house party or an Oxford college; a detective, amateur or professional, who has an avenging duty to solve the crime. The solution is one that the reader should be able to arrive at from the clues inserted in the novel.

So why do I read these books? Sometimes just for diversion or local color: Camillieri for Sicily or Felicity McNabb for Florence. Are these books literature? Clearly some mystery novels are just potboilers. But many are serious books.

W. H. Auden diagrammed the mystery novel as a theological framework:

Peaceful state before the murder  
|  
The murder  
|  
False clues and perhaps secondary murder  
|  
Solution  
|  
Arrest of Murderer  
|  
Peaceful state after arrest

Thus the detective becomes an agent to undo sin, a means to restore, if not Eden, a peaceful state.

Curiously, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple comes closest to Auden's ideal. Miss Marple's village is a little English Eden, everything ordered and in place. There is a parlor maid at the Vicarage; genteel older ladies go to the seaside to stay in respectable hotels, and the village constable tips his helmet to women. Murder disturbs this Eden. But when the murder is solved, Eden is restored. The Vicar still has a parlor maid, trips to the seaside resume, and the constable tips his hat although it has taken Miss Marple to solve the crime. There is no note of judgment because "God is in his heaven and all is right with the world."

After nearly 60 years of celebrating the Holy Mysteries as a priest in this church, I'm delighted to indulge in these "unholy mysteries" in my retirement. Martin Luther once wrote, "Be a sinner and sin boldly." The "golden age" novels still gleam for me, and I am happy to have Donna Leon, Elizabeth George, James Runcie, J. K. Rowling, and Jo Nesbo lead me boldly ever deeper into sin.



19 East 34th Street  
New York, NY 10016  
[www.cpg.org](http://www.cpg.org)