

Mystery of evil: Sin in the novels of P. D. James

by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

The archbishop of Canterbury recently observed that “P. D. James is our most Augustinian writer.” James’s reflections in her 2009 book *Talking About Detective Fiction* justify Rowan Williams’s claim. She writes that murder mysteries have an immense appeal because they treat the final crime: the intentional taking of human life, an evil that allows no earthly reparation. The title of one of her own widely admired murder mysteries, *Original Sin*, reveals her conviction that homicide has its roots in a primeval twisting of our native desire for God.

Such acts of violence and mayhem are committed not primarily by malefactors from the underworld, James demonstrates, but often by the prosperous and the upright. “The successful middle-class character is more often than not the murderer,” she declares. “In general, the butler didn’t do it.” James’s own mystery novels are so compelling because they disclose that, like all other sinners, murderers can justify their ways and means. Her mainstream killers do not act arbitrarily; nor do they kill for the nihilistic frisson of watching their victims squirm at the approach of death. Instead, they slay with a cause, at least as they see it: to avenge the unrequited love, to protect the innocent, to provide for the indigent, and so on.

Evil, for P. D. James as for St. Augustine, is to be understood as *privatio boni*, the loss or absence or perversion of the good, the deformation of true being. The bishop of Hippo developed this revolutionary insight from the Neoplatonists, and it became a staple of Christian thought from Boethius forward. Augustine’s purpose was to demonstrate that the universe is God’s good creation, that it is rational at its core, and thus that evil is not a gross absurdity.

The doctrine of original sin does not mean that the world is madly, hopelessly lost—so that human nature becomes so utterly depraved that it must be replaced. Pervasive and all-infectious though it is, sin makes a sort of sense. Its tangled logic can be reordered to the logos of God, as the Old Adam is reborn, restored and made

alive in the New. The world's malignancy does not stand, therefore, as a Manichaeian rival to God. Though capable of immense harm and destruction, evil cannot finally triumph. Not even the strongholds of hell can prevent God's kingdom from breaking down their gates in ultimate victory.

James would seem, at first sight, to confine her Augustinianism to her own detective novels. She worries, in fact, that murder mysteries often serve as an easy anodyne, a spiritual narcotic, a pleasurable escape—sedating us against real evils, both without and within, while inviting us to the cerebral delight of discovering “whodunit.” James admits that her own career as a crime writer was launched when her parents read “Humpty Dumpty” to her at age five: immediately she asked, “Was he pushed?”

Murder fiction devoted mainly to the intricacies of plot rarely invites rereading. Readers of detective fiction often circulate their books because the crime and the criminal, once found out, offer no reason for further reflection. The momentary intellectual thrill of matching wits with the detective writer has led highbrow critics from Matthew Arnold to Edmund Wilson to denounce the genre as unworthy of serious minds. James cites Agatha Christie as a virtuoso of the complex plot. Yet she also vindicates the grande dame of murder mysteries: “Agatha Christie has provided entertainment, suspense and temporary relief from the anxieties and traumas of life in both peace and war for millions throughout the world, and this is an achievement which merits our gratitude and respect.”

Even so, James admires a worthier kind of mystery fiction, the kind that has moral and spiritual complexity. She traces its rise to Wilkie Collins (*The Moonstone*) and Edgar Allan Poe in the 19th century. Its golden age came between the two world wars, and its masters were Arthur Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton and Dorothy L. Sayers. In the U.S., high-quality detective fiction takes a more hard-boiled and individualist turn in the works of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. James's recent heroes are almost all women writers: Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham, Sara Paretsky and Ruth Rendell.

James disagrees with historians of the detective genre who track its rise to the Industrial Revolution, the massive growth of cities, and thus the urban necessity of police and investigators. She traces its emergence, instead, to the vexations that followed World War I, especially the Depression, unemployment and “the storm clouds over Europe.” There has been no lessening of the appeal of detective fiction,

James argues. These too are “times of unrest, anxiety and uncertainty, when society can be faced with problems which no money, political theories or good intentions seem able to solve or alleviate.”

When social problems seem overwhelming, as in our own age of terrorism and other seemingly insoluble evils, the appeal of detective books becomes especially strong. Even if the larger world cannot be put to rights, personal justice can be both sought and found, though with enormous difficulty. We are drawn to murder mysteries for reasons that, for James, remain essentially personal and humanistic. Crimes are detected and punished, she writes:

not by luck or divine intervention, but by human ingenuity, human intelligence and human courage. It confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos.

James’s mention of evidence to the contrary reveals that she is a Christian and Augustinian kind of humanist. The hope held out by detective fiction is indeed bright, but for her it remains deeply shadowed by sin. It is not the macabre physical horror of the murders themselves that darkens detective stories. We keep returning to the best of them, James maintains, because they are concerned with the veiled motives of those who commit the quintessential crime.

Whether in Sayers’s *The Nine Tailors*, Chesterton’s Father Brown stories or Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet*, the scene and the atmosphere also serve to disclose character—the knotty and often contradictory qualities that do not constitute the killers alone, but also the detectives and even the victims. There is something immensely hopeful about the power of the sympathetic imagination to make us care for creatures whom we might instinctively despise:

The victim is the catalyst at the heart of the novel and he dies because of who he is, and the destructive power he exercises, acknowledged or secret, over the life of at least one desperate enemy. His voice may be stilled for most of the novel, his testimony given in the voices of others, by the detritus he leaves in his rooms, his drawers and his cupboards, and by the scalpels of the forensic pathologist, but for the reader, at least in

thought, he must be powerfully alive. Murder is the unique crime, and its investigation tears down the privacy of both the living and the dead. It is this study of human beings under the stress of this self-revelatory probing which for a writer is one of the chief attractions of the genre.

“The stress of this self-revelatory probing” applies to the reader no less than the writer. We too are being interrogated. “The only thrill, even of a common thriller,” James quotes Chesterton as saying, “is concerned somehow with the conscience and the will.” These were also Augustine’s concerns. He enabled Christians to develop an understanding of evil as the ruination of God’s good creation by disordered desire: by a perverted love of the wrong things, or the wrong persons, or the wrong places, or to the wrong extent. James quotes Adam Dalgliesh, her own master sleuth, on the unwitting Augustinian wisdom that an older detective sergeant once taught him: “All motives can be explained under the letter L: lust, lucre, loathing and love. They’ll tell you that the most dangerous is loathing but don’t you believe it, boy: the most dangerous is love.”

Murder, James contends, “carries an atavistic weight of repugnance, fascination and fear.” We are at once repelled and attracted to depictions of the supreme offense because the line dividing good and evil does not separate the noble from the savage, the blameless from the guilty. It bisects every human heart: “Few people opening their door to two grave-faced detectives with a request that they should accompany them to the police station would do so without a qualm of unease, however certain they may be of their complete innocence.”

In her 90th year, James has proven herself to be a masterful Augustinian not only in the writing but also in the analysis of detective fiction.