

Reasons for writing: An interview with P. D. James

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue

One of contemporary England's celebrated writers, P. D. James has published 14 novels and three works of nonfiction. Adam Dalgliesh, the main character of her detective fictions, has become a favorite of readers of mysteries and many TV watchers as well. Original Sin (1995) and A Certain Justice (1997) are the two most recent Dalgliesh novels that have been dramatized on the TV series Mystery. James's novel The Children of Men (1992), which she calls "a Christian fable," has won acclaim in both critical and religious circles. A devoted churchwoman, James discusses her religious formation and her faith in her recent memoir, Time to Be in Earnest (2000). Now retired, she worked for 30 years in various departments of the British Civil Service, including the Police and Criminal Law Divisions of the Home Office. She was created Baroness James of Holland Park in 1991, and has taken seriously her consequent duties in the House of Lords. I spoke to her soon after the publication of her memoir.

You say in your autobiography that you don't intend to uncover topics "over which memory has exercised a self-defensive censorship." You don't want to awaken those "dangerous and unpredictable beasts [that] lie curled in the pit of the subconscious." The conviction among many memoirists these days seems to be that awakening and confronting those beasts is the proper task of autobiography—only by confronting them can we become whole. What do you think of the therapeutic approach to writing?

I think that writing *is* therapeutic. I agree with the psychologist who said that creativity is the successful resolution of internal conflict. But when it comes to autobiography, I myself don't want the beasts roaring around. It's not that I'm suppressing them. I know who and what they are. But I think there's something a bit self-indulgent in feeling that we can say absolutely everything. I think there are things that have happened in our lives that we have to accept and come to terms

with, but I don't think that we necessarily have to write about them.

I don't like the kind of autobiography in which people complain bitterly about their childhood, or about the way they were brought up, or about their parents' lives. I find that rather distasteful. It seems a fashionable thing to do, but I don't think that I would ever want to do it.

Your memoir deals more with ideas than with emotions or personalities. Does this reflect your character and your way of life?

Through fiction I can deal with strong emotions by letting my characters feel them. But when it comes to autobiography, I prefer to deal with ideas. I prefer to be reasonably discreet, and I try to be as honest as I can. I think I say in the book that all fiction is to a certain extent autobiographical, and all autobiography is to a certain extent fiction. We can never be sure how accurately we remember. If I had written this book 30 years ago, I might have seen things quite differently. An autobiography is a picture of how one sees one's life at one moment in time. But since I was getting on to 80 (my 80th birthday was this summer), I thought that it was probably a good time to take a look at my life.

You have said that the motive for murder that interests you most is that arising from disordered love—from the misguided attempt to protect or avenge someone one loves. What makes this motive especially rich?

I think it's particularly rich because it arises from something that in itself is good. Other motives for murder, such as selfishness, greed, lust, anger and envy, are sins. The love and protection we feel for someone else is in itself good, but even that good, if taken to excess, can result in this terrible crime. What makes someone who is essentially good, who is educated, who is law-abiding—someone who should be able to understand his motives and perhaps have more insight into himself and others than most people do—what makes him cross that invisible line that divides the murderer from the rest of us? That's an interesting and complex puzzle.

When you portray young people who commit a murder, you don't focus on the environmental factors that might explain their actions.

Undoubtedly, environment is significant. I don't think there are any serious child criminals who come from a stable, happy background. They don't all, of course, come from economically deprived backgrounds. We know there have been horrid

cases of very wealthy young men who have done terrible things, but on the whole these criminals have not had happy or stable homes, and obviously that plays a part. But the fact remains that millions of children who live in deprivation or poverty or have great difficulties don't grow up to be callous murderers. If crime just arose from deprivation, we'd only have to do away with the deprivation in order to have a law-abiding and healthy society. I tend to believe in original sin, and in the need for grace. We are all capable of criminal and dreadful behavior.

Nowadays people tend toward the notion that there is some genetic predisposition, some kind of criminal gene, that makes certain people do dreadful things when under stress. What do you think of that kind of explanation?

Well, I don't know enough about that, unfortunately. But if it should prove to be so, and one could identify these people at a very young age, what would one do then? They have their right to civil liberties. One can't say, "If you have this dangerous gene, you must be locked up," or "We must watch you day and night." It may not be so easy to deal with.

You offer a long list of reasons why one might become a detective novelist. One reason that seems especially important has to do with the mastery of one's feelings about death. Has this been the most important motivation for you? What about others?

To make money never has been very important for me. Rather, it has been important because I have had family to support, but it hasn't been among my most important reasons for writing. I have psychologically needed to be a writer, and I think that I need the structure that this particular form gives.

I have been preoccupied with death from early on—from childhood, I think. It fascinated me. Once I became aware of it, it was never totally absent from my mind. I can't explain at all why that should be so. I sometimes wonder if it could have been the effect of the First World War. I was born in 1920, two years after the war ended, and it seemed for a long time as if the whole country was under a cloud of perpetual mourning for the generation lost in that war.

How does religion help you deal with this preoccupation, and with the process of aging?

It helps me to deal with absolutely every aspect of life. By religion, I don't mean the regular practice of religion—that is, regular churchgoing or Bible reading. I mean the awareness of the reality of God. The sense that he exists, that I can communicate with him, that he loves me, and that I must try to live my life, as far as possible, in the way that he would wish. Very often I don't succeed. But I have never doubted those realities. I'm a communicant member of the Church of England. I've never left the church and would not wish to do so, though there's much in it that I'm critical of.

Do you think you are unusual among your literary acquaintances in your adherence to faith and to the church?

Not altogether. Ruth Rendell is a churchwoman. I certainly have found faith important, but I do have friends who are totally without it and who cope admirably with life, sometimes under difficult circumstances, and who live extremely good lives. It isn't a given that if you have faith, you're happy, and if you don't have it you're miserable; or that you have it and you're good, and you don't have it and you're less good; or even that you have it and you're comforted, and you don't have it and you're not comforted. I sometimes think that religious faith is rather like musicality. You're either born with it or not. Some of my friends who haven't got faith find it rather a surprising thing to have. Religion is a dimension of life of which they have no understanding, really.

The Victorians feared that loss of religious faith would undermine the moral structure of society. You don't seem to agree that it has had that effect.

The moral structure certainly has been undermined, to a certain extent, but that has been very much caused by the breakup of the family and the lack of respect for any authority. It has come about by degrees, really, and through a certain amount of selfishness, aggression and anger. But I wouldn't say it necessarily was caused by the decline of religion, though that has played a part. A recent poll said that 77 percent of England's young people say they have no religious belief. That's a very, very high proportion, considerably higher than in the United States. What has changed, really, is the degree to which the entire Judeo-Christian ethos and teaching guides our lives and society.

You are a great defender of the 16th-century version of the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer, written by Archbishop Thomas

Cranmer, and of the King James Bible. In the U.S. these old forms seem no longer to speak to people.

The same thing is happening here. People feel much more comfortable with the new and the contemporary. Those of us who love the old liturgy certainly have to remember that that love was nurtured in our childhood, that these wonderful prayers and phrases are part of the whole richness of our minds. They're there in our minds. If people haven't had that, if they first hear this language in adulthood, it must seem rather strange. I belong to the Prayer Book Society—a group of people devoted to our prayer book, which is lovely, and actively concerned that it still have a place in Anglican worship. It is a most incomparable book.

Readers of your mysteries have an especially strong relationship with your Scotland Yard detective Adam Dalgliesh. What do you think makes him a more durable character than the private investigator Cordelia Gray, another one of your detectives?

I think Dalgliesh gives me more scope. I try to write reasonably realistic novels, and, realistically, private eyes don't have the same opportunity to investigate matters—they don't have the authority or the resources, so most of the plots that occur to me are plots that wouldn't be suitable for a private eye.

The other difficulty is that the wretched film companies who have made the Cordelia Gray series have made her not only into an unmarried mother, but into an extremely stupid and ineffective detective. This has inhibited me from being able to write about her. If I do write about her again, I'll probably have to start off the book by saying that they had no right to do this, that she isn't the way they've depicted her. It's an irritating problem.

For many Christian readers *The Children of Men* was your most significant book. What prompted you to attempt this kind of departure from crime fiction?

I wrote it because the idea for it came to me and excited me. I didn't think, "Well, it's time I change direction," or "It's time I stop writing mysteries," or "I must look for another idea," or "I want to write a Christian book." None of that. The idea struck me when I read a review calling attention to the extraordinary fall in the fertility of Western men. The review claimed that young men were only half as fertile as their fathers, and pointed out that many of the billions of life forms that have inhabited

earth have died out. Man, too, might possibly do so. That made me wonder what kind of world, what sort of England, we would have 25 years after a catastrophic year in which all over the earth—on every continent and among every race—no baby had been born. What would happen if there were a sort of universal infertility?

I wanted it to be an exciting book. It is in a sense a crime novel. But I also wanted it to deal with some of the social problems of the day, with the way in which we treat the old, and in which religion is popularized, for example. In the end it became something of a Christian fable, although I hadn't set out to write one. If I got another idea which excited me as much, I would write another novel of that kind. But so far I haven't.

In *Time to Be in Earnest* you say that that novel was especially agonizing to write, in a way that the detective fiction isn't. Why was that?

In some ways it was easier to write, because we see everything through only one intelligence, one mind, one voice, which is Theo's. It drives to its conclusion with considerable force, and it's much less complicated technically than the crime novels are. But it was more arduous to write emotionally, perhaps because it deals not only with difficult subjects, but also with emotionally exhausting and worrying ones. Although there is, thank God, hope at the end, it is in parts a depressing book.

Your method in *Time to Be in Earnest* is very like that of your detective fiction: you don't speak directly about many of your feelings or the painful events of your life, but the clues are there to allow a reader to surmise them. For example, you speak indirectly about the pain of your husband's mental illness by discussing Ted Hughes's poems about his relationship with Sylvia Plath.

I think that's a fair assessment of my method, but I don't think that it was deliberate. I find very interesting the interpretations people give of my work. I can see the point of many of these interpretations, but I wasn't myself aware at the time of what I was doing.

Your life seems busy and eventful. How does your schedule allow you time for researching and writing a novel?

I try to write in the mornings because I'm fresher then, and I get more tired as the day goes on. I'm just finishing a new Dalgliesh, but I'm not having nearly enough time. The publicity for the autobiography is taking a great deal of time, as is the

House of Lords. It's very rare indeed to have a free day. But the calls and demands don't really begin until nine or half past, so that gives me a few hours to write. I wake up quite easily in the mornings, though my energy level on the whole is not what I once had. But I am enjoying this new Dalgliesh very much, and am just wishing desperately that I had more time, more peace. I can tell you one thing about the book: Dalgliesh will come very close to falling in love.