

Death in Holy Orders, by P. D. James

reviewed by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

What was it . . . about this place that made him feel that his life was under judgement?" Adam Dalgliesh wonders during a sleepless night at St. Anselm's Theological College, the setting of P. D. James's new novel. Not only James's durable detective but all of the other major characters in residence at the college during the week of a dramatic murder find their lives brought under judgment.

Setting has always been important to James, as has the Anglican Church. She is especially fond of the lonely, windswept coast of the North Sea, the locale of her isolated theological school. As the sea erodes the cliffs on which St. Anselm's is perched, so contemporary mores are eroding the tradition and prestige of the high-church Anglicanism the college and its warden, Sebastian Morell, represent. Archdeacon Crampton, pastor of an evangelical inner-city church and self-styled champion of ecclesiastical modernity, is the enemy of all that St. Anselm's represents.

"Unless the church adapts itself to meet the needs of the twenty-first century, it will die," he tells Father Sebastian. "The life your young men live here is ridiculously privileged, totally remote from the lives of the men and women they will be expected to serve. . . . What training do they receive in sociology, in race relations, in interfaith co-operation?" The archdeacon is determined to close the college, but would any of the four resident priests, all of whom have reason to dislike him, commit murder in order to save it? Would any of the students? And what about the rest of the staff, and the three visitors who are at the college when the murder occurs?

In the debate between tradition and modernity, James's personal sympathy is with tradition. Perhaps that is why Father Sebastian's answer to the archdeacon is especially eloquent: "What is it that you want? A Church without mystery, stripped of that learning, tolerance and dignity that were the virtues of Anglicanism? . . . Services with banal hymns, a debased liturgy and the Eucharist conducted as if it were a parish bean-feast?" It is a mark of James's fair-mindedness that she gives

both sides their due. And when the archdeacon dies, he does so in a state of grace. Though someone at St. Anselm's kills him, the place has had its effect on him, bringing him to face his responsibility for his wife's death and to ask God's forgiveness.

James's broad sympathy is also evident in her portrayal of Father John Betterton, the gay, elderly priest who has been unjustly accused of sexual molestation. Her priests and ordinands are fallible human beings, but they are serious about their faith and committed to their calling. The people found wanting in this novel are those who arrogantly refuse to acknowledge anything greater than themselves or to judge their lives and conduct.

That James packs so much theological discussion and meaning into a suspenseful detective story, and manages sometimes to be very funny as well, makes her book remarkable. Her Dalgliesh mysteries meld serious literature with the conventions of genre fiction. At heart, she's a Victorian novelist writing long, complex narratives with multiple plots and well-developed characters. Her large and loyal readership will be glad to learn that Dalgliesh, the detective about whom she has written for some 40 years now, falls in love in this novel.

His moment of truth at St. Anselm's comes when he realizes that he has been "a detached observer of life." He asks himself, "If you stood apart long enough, weren't you in danger of stifling, perhaps even losing, that quickening spirit which the priests here would call the soul?" The realization leads to his willingness to begin a relationship with Emma Lavenham, one of James's most winning heroines.

When James spoke recently before a large audience at the Chicago Public Library, people asked her many questions about the book, but no one asked her about anything even remotely having to do with religion. But this is a book very concerned with faith and with life's ultimate questions--as befits the work of a writer who is approaching her 81st birthday. James here is writing at the top of her powers, at least until the novel's uncharacteristically slack conclusion. The solution of the mystery comes too soon and is followed by pages of long-drawn-out heroics. Yet that's a minor flaw in a novel that, more than a murder mystery, is also a book about life's great mysteries.