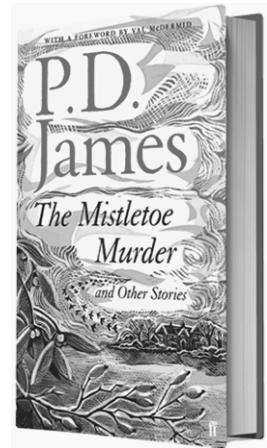


Preface to *The Mistletoe Murder and Other Stories*, 2017

by P.D. James

- 1 In her introduction to an anthology of short crime stories published in 1934, Dorothy L. Sayers wrote: 'Death seems to provide the minds of the Anglo-Saxon race with a greater fund of innocent amusement than any other single subject.' She was, of course, writing not of the horrifying, messy and occasionally pathetic murders of real life, but of the mysterious, elegantly contrived and popular concoctions of crime writers. Perhaps amusement is hardly the word; entertainment, relaxation or excitement would all be more appropriate. And, to judge from the universal popularity of crime writing, it isn't only the Anglo-Saxons who evince enthusiasm for murder most foul. Millions of readers throughout the world are at home in Sherlock Holmes's claustrophobic sanctum at 221B Baker Street, Miss Marple's charming cottage in St Mary Mead, and Lord Peter Wimsey's elegant Piccadilly flat.
- 2 In the period leading up to the Second World War, much of crime writing was done in the form of a short story. The two writers who can be regarded as the founding fathers of the detective story, Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, were both masters of the form, and the former adumbrated most of the distinguishing features not only of the short story, but of the crime novel: the least likely suspect as murderer, the closed-room mystery, the case solved by an armchair detective, and the epistolary narrative. Eric Ambler has written: 'The Detective story may have been born in the mind of Edgar Allan Poe, but it was London that fed it, clothed it and brought it to maturity.' He was, of course, thinking of the genius of Conan Doyle, creator of the most famous detective in literature. He bequeathed to the genre a respect for reason, a non-abstract intellectualism, a reliance on ratiocination rather than on physical force, an abhorrence of sentimentality and the power to create an atmosphere of mystery and gothic horror which is yet firmly rooted in physical reality. Above all, more than any other writer he established the tradition of the great detective, that omniscient amateur whose personal, sometimes bizarre eccentricity is contrasted with the rationality of his methods and who provides for the reader the comforting reassurance that, despite our apparent powerlessness, we yet inhabit an intelligible universe.
- 3 Although the Sherlock Holmes stories are the most famous of this period, they are not the only ones worth re-reading. Julian Symons, a respected critic of crime fiction, pointed out that most of the notable practitioners in the art of the short story turned to detection as a relief from their other work and enjoyed using a form still in its infancy which offered them infinite opportunities for originality and variation. G.K. Chesterton is an example of a writer whose main interest lay



elsewhere but whose Father Brown stories are still read with pleasure. And it is surprising how many other distinguished writers tried their hand at the short crime story. In the second series of *Great Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, published in 1931, the contributors included H.G. Wells, Wilkie Collins, Walter de la Mare, Charles Dickens and Arthur Quiller-Couch, in addition to the names we would expect to find.

- 4 Few detective novelists writing today are uninfluenced by the founding fathers, but most crime writers produce novels rather than short stories. Part of the reason for this is the greatly reduced market for short stories generally, but the main reason is perhaps that the detective story has moved closer to mainstream fiction and a writer needs space if he or she is fully to explore the psychological subtleties of character, the complications of relationships, and the impact of murder and of a police investigation on the lives of those characters.
- 5 The scope of the short story is inevitably restricted and this means it is most effective when it deals with a single incident or one dominant idea. It is the originality and strength of this idea which largely determine the success of the story. Although it is far less complex in structure than a novel, more linear in concept, driving single-mindedly to its denouement, the short story can still provide within its smaller compass a credible world into which the reader can enter for those satisfactions which we expect from good crime writing: a plausible mystery, tension and excitement, characters with whom we can identify if not always sympathise, and an ending which does not disappoint. There is a satisfying art in containing within a few thousand words all those elements of plot, setting, characterisation and surprise which go to provide a good crime story.
- 6 Although most of my own work has been as a novelist, I have greatly enjoyed the challenge of the short story. 34 There is not space for long and detailed descriptions of place, but the setting must still come alive for the reader. Characterisation is as important as in the novel, but the essentials of a personality must be established with an economy of words. The plot must be strong but not too complex, and the denouement, to which every sentence of the narrative should inexorably lead, must surprise the reader but not leave him feeling cheated. All should command the most ingenious element of the short story: the shock of surprise. The good short story is accordingly difficult to write well, but in this busy age it can provide one of the most satisfactory reading experiences.