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Murder, Manners and Mystery (John Albert Hall Lecture Series)

Peter C. Erb

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Highlighting popular works by P.D. James, Colin Dexter, Ian Pears and Umberto Eco, among others, this subtle and intelligently written monograph examines the treatment of religion in the genre of contemporary murder mystery novels, and the implications of this phenomenon for understanding Christian thought in a post-Christian society. The book begins by considering the critical question of authorial intent and the question of genre criticism and what makes a genre, a 'serious' literary specialism. Is crime fiction ever destined to be written by 'serious authors'? Erb argues that P D James proves this possible, writing for a multi-faceted, secular, popular audience and setting her books in a Christian context. The question, what is mystery is fully explored in the opening chapter, where Erb examines James' A Taste for Death and Devices and Desires, and contrasts their treatment of mystery with Colin Dexter's treatment in Death is now my Neighbour. The second chapter considers the popularity of detective fiction at large focussing on James' Original Sin and Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose. The third chapter focuses on the problem of justice. Who is the murderer? This is the key to all detective novels: the murder itself is secondary. The narrative depends on the murderer's ability to replace a crime with a convincingly constructed illusion of innocence, and to escape punishment by means of good manners. Erb explores this problem, first evident in Exodus, in P D James' A Certain Justice and Ian Pears' An Instance of the Fingerpost. Finally Erb looks at retribution. Can justice ever be anything more than retribution, death without hope? What satisfaction can be made for the loss of a human life? How can a murderer ever fully confess a crime and experience thanksgiving in final release from the consequences? These questions are considered in light of James' Death in Holy Orders, and Colin Dexter's A Remorseful Day.

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