

"I have a careless rage for life. . . ."

When she had delivered her child to her cousin, Dorothy went back to London and to work. Her colleagues at Benson's, assuming that she had recovered from her illness, assured her that she looked fit and well. She had lost her hair again and took to wearing a striking silver wig that went well with her exotic style of dress. Benson's must have been a life-saver, and she flourished in the bustling, creative atmosphere of the ad agency—free to indulge her love of words and verbal cleverness and getting paid for it.

Over the years she impressed more than a few of her working colleagues with her wit and style, both on and off the page. She was intimately involved in several of Benson's most successful advertising ventures, particularly the long-running Mustard Club campaign for Coleman's mustard and the ubiquitous Zoo ads for Guinness. One of her best friends at Benson's was a young artist named John Gilroy, who later received his knighthood as one of England's most-admired portrait artists. (It was Gilroy who accompanied Dorothy to Surrey on a dreary December day in 1926 when volunteers were called out to search for the missing detective writer Agatha Christie.) Gilroy remembered her as wonderfully funny, a superb copywriter, and to his artist's eye, attractive in spite of her increasing girth. Gilroy painted and sketched her several times: "terrific size—lovely fat fingers—lovely snub nose—lovely curly lips—a baby's face in a way."*

Dorothy worked at Benson's for nine years, and Gilroy believed she might have become a company director had she stayed. But for Dorothy, advertising eventually lost its edge, and she developed serious concerns about the ethics of the profession. Benson's was a means to her end: the support of the "fine little chap" whom she had consigned to the care of her cousin.

In 1924, Dorothy made one exception to her rule of absolute secrecy about John Anthony's existence. She wrote to John Cournos, who had returned to London, initiating a series of letters of which only her side remains. She wished Cournos well in his marriage and told him about her baby: "Both of us did what we swore we'd never do, you see—I do hope your experiment turned out better than mine." When Cournos pursued the correspondence and asked to meet, she agreed, but told him, "It's going to hurt me like hell to see you, because Judah with all thy faults I love thee still. . . ."

The letters to Cournos—so unlike the perky, gossipy, witty letters she

* Quoted by James Brabazon in *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*.

wrote to family and friends—are dark and anguished. She still loved Cournos but blamed him for her circumstances: “You broke your own image in my heart, you see. You stood to me for beauty and truth—and you demanded ugliness, barrenness—and it seems now that even in doing so, you were just lying.” She confessed her loneliness and the fearsome responsibility she felt for her son. “It frightens me to be so unhappy,” she wrote. “I thought it would get better, but I think every day is worse than the last, and I’m always afraid they’ll chuck me out of the office because I’m working so badly. And I haven’t even the last resort of doing away with myself, because what would poor Anthony do then, poor thing?”

Dorothy wanted both to share her pain and to make Cournos appreciate his loss: “I swear that if you had offered me love—or even asked for love—you should have had everything.” She demeaned him, as he had demeaned her: “You were a rotten companion for a poor girl.” She rejected him: “*As a companion* you aren’t my choice.” Dorothy ranted and raved, “. . . my dear, you stripped love down to its merest and most brutal physical contact. . . .”

She and Cournos met, perhaps several times, and he apparently suggested finding her a husband or lover. She entered into a mocking game, naming this phantom man “Troilus.” She lectured Cournos about the difference between the married and unmarried states. She taunted him about his wife’s age and future childbearing capability. (Sybil Norton already had two children before marrying Cournos.) She called Bill White the “Beast” but would not allow Cournos to criticize him. In her letters, Dorothy is a tornado of agony and anger: “I have a careless rage for life, and secrecy tends to make me bad-tempered. . . . I like to die spitting and swearing, you know, and I’m no mean wrestler.”

(Dorothy’s letters to Cournos should not be taken entirely at face value. The anger and pain were undeniably real, but there was more than a little overdramatizing and self-conscious intellectualizing. She wanted to hurt Cournos: she used every verbal weapon in her arsenal; and her harangues can be heartbreaking. But they can also be peevish and adolescent.)

As it must, the violence finally played itself out, and Dorothy’s last extant letter to Cournos is almost collegial. He had sent her an article on detective fiction written by G. K. Chesterton. “Many thanks,” she replied. “. . . I am indebted to you for saving me six useful pennies.” We do not know if they ever met again.

Since the story of her son’s existence was made public in the 1970s, biographers and critics have speculated about Dorothy’s sense of guilt. It is only speculation because Dorothy left no record on the issue except what can be interpreted from her letters to Cournos and Ivy Shrimpton.

She did believe in the reality of sin and its consequences, and biographer Barbara Reynolds, a close friend of Dorothy's near the end of her life, makes the case that, as an Anglo-Catholic, Dorothy had recourse to confession, absolution, and compensation. The "bitter sin" of premarital sex could be forgiven and purged. "In practical terms," Dr. Reynolds has written, "this meant supporting and educating John Anthony and providing him, as best she could, with maternal love and concern for his welfare. This responsibility she amply fulfilled and continued to fulfill, for the rest of his life." Whether or not Dorothy was truly capable of a mother's love for her son, she felt absolutely responsible for him. When he was small, she visited him frequently, took pride in his progress, and wrote to Ivy, "Whoever suffers over this business . . . it mustn't be John Anthony. If the poor little soul has to be fatherless, at least he mustn't be motherless."

*"Give me a man that's human and careless and loves
life, and one who can enjoy the rough-and-tumble of
passion."*

—letter to John Cournos, January 1925

Returning to London after John Anthony's birth, Dorothy completed her second "Lord Peter"—*Clouds of Witness*. She struggled with and never liked this novel because it reminded her too vividly of her own state of mind during the tumult of 1922–1924. In a letter to Cournos, she described it as the "cursed book—associated with every sort of humiliation and misery. . . ." By the time of her last letter to Cournos, however, she was already at work on *Unnatural Death*.

She and her son weathered one near-catastrophe, the death of Aunt Amy Shrimpton in April 1925 and the possibility that Ivy would have to give up her foster home for children. Worse, Dorothy's mother, who stayed with Ivy to help with the funeral arrangements, had met John Anthony,* and Dorothy again agonized over telling her parents the truth. But, no; she wrote Ivy, "If we told Mother, she'd want to help, and I don't want to be helped. It's my look-out entirely, and it's feeble if I can't manage without help—financially that, I mean—" The issue was mooted when Ivy decided to keep her home and the children, and Dorothy's parents never learned that the sturdy little one-year-old among the foster children at Cowley was their only grandson.

When Anthony was born, Dorothy thought that she might someday

* Dorothy usually referred to her son as "John" or "J.A.," but after coming of age, he always used "Anthony."

wish to reclaim him, but considered marriage an unlikely prospect for herself. On April 13, 1926, she reversed course—wedding a journalist and war veteran named Oswald Arthur Fleming in a London registrar's office. He had adopted the name "Atherton Fleming" for publication, but everyone knew him as "Mac," the voluble, hearty Scot.

Mac was just the kind of husband Dorothy thought she wanted: interesting, experienced, a manly man, but seemingly up to her intellectual standards—although he carried the baggage of an unhappy divorce and two adolescent daughters whom he had effectively abandoned after the war. When Dorothy met him, he was reporting for the *News of the World* (his beats were crime and motor racing), freelancing for other publications, and writing some advertising copy for extra income. Dorothy was now almost thirty-three, and Mac was forty-four (the same age as John Cournos). They had a great deal in common. Mac had published one book and was a dab hand at painting and photography (a hobby of Dorothy's that Cournos had mocked). He shared Dorothy's lusty approach to sex, food and drink, and conversation. Dorothy was open with him about her affair with Bill White and her illegitimate son; far from being horrified, Mac didn't care. He even expressed interest in taking on the father role and bringing John Anthony into the fold.

Dorothy worried how her parents would take the news of her union with a divorced man, a marriage that the Church of England would not recognize, and she delayed contacting them until a week before the wedding. Perhaps another family scandal—Reverend Sayers's elderly brother Cecil had recently separated from his second wife after he had been caught in flagrante with a much younger woman in the potting shed—took the sting out of Dorothy's announcement. Her parents, initially shaken, took the news well on the whole. They did not attend the registry office ceremony, but on Dorothy's wedding night, Henry and Nell Sayers toasted with champagne. Aunt Mabel, however, abstained.

Dorothy and Mac's first visit to Christchurch went beautifully; everyone got along, and Mac, a serious gourmet, was particularly impressed by Nell's table and household management. The new son-in-law was soon addressing Reverend Sayers as "guv'nor" and Nell as "Mother" and making himself thoroughly liked among the citizens of Christchurch. (The locals had never taken a fancy to their rector's aloof and unconventional daughter.) Mac even made a convert of Aunt Mabel, who rarely approved of any husbands.

Mac moved into Dorothy's Great James Street flat in London, and Dorothy at last was able to enjoy a satisfying relationship with a man who was a charming and interesting companion, a gifted raconteur, an experienced and caring lover, and a cook "capable of turning out a perfect dinner for any number of people." Although Dorothy kept her mar-

riage separate from her work at Benson's—John Gilroy was never introduced to Mac—she delighted in accompanying her husband to the auto races at Brooklands, where he reported on and sometimes organized events. In the early spring of 1927, they traveled to France: he was covering two crimes that were then being sensationalized in the British press. Dorothy, like Lord Peter Wimsey, enjoyed the riotous company of Mac's Fleet Street friends, the hard-living crowd of journalists who had toasted the Flemings' marriage by getting "incapably drunk" at their favored pub, the Falstaff. The newlyweds frequented the cinema, theater, and pubs, and they entertained friends at home, with Mac as head chef.

Marriage seemed to suit both partners well, and for the time, plans to bring home John Anthony, whom Mac had met in May of 1926, were put on hold. Dorothy and Mac were both working overtime, and the Great James Street apartment was cramped for just two people. Even with Mac's help (he contributed recipes and ideas for the Mustard Club campaign, helped with her editing projects, handled her public relations, and kept track of her press clippings), Dorothy was busy day and night with her job at Benson's and her writing. She had no time to tackle motherhood if she was to continue to earn the wherewithal to ensure her son's future.

Whether Dorothy really wanted to mother her small son is another question. In 1928, Ivy moved her foster brood to a small cottage in the village of Westcott Parton, northeast of Oxford. That same year, Dorothy and Mac substantially enlarged the Great James Street flat by taking the apartment above and combining the two into a comfortable maisonette. There surely would have been room for a four-year-old boy and a nursemaid, but Dorothy had decided that men generally do not enjoy the company of small children, though her own experience had certainly been the opposite. It was she who seemed frightened of nurturing. Despite the earth mother fantasies she had expressed to John Cournos, she plainly did not have any inherent fondness for young children. When she learned that John Anthony, who had been taught to call her "Cousin Dorothy," had broken his collarbone at age two and a half, there was no rushing off to be at his side; instead, she wrote to Ivy approving of his "pluck," and noting "maternal affection is by no means my strong point, I must say, but if there must be children, it is preferable that they should have some guts."

Although Dorothy and Mac informally "adopted" John Anthony later on and the child took Mac's surname, he never lived with them, and Ivy was always his mother figure. In her 1928 novel, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, Dorothy gave Lord Peter a sarcastic little speech that perhaps reflected her own view: "I'm determined never to be a parent. Modern manners and the break-up of the fine old traditions

have simply ruined the business. I shall devote my life and fortune to the endowment of research on the best method of producin' human beings decorously and unobtrusively from eggs. All parental responsibility to devolve upon the incubator." Dorothy herself took every precaution to avoid another pregnancy.

To be fair, Dorothy's interest in John Anthony's education, religious training, and intellectual development was sincere, and she never shunted off her financial duties. But even in the private letters she wrote to her son and signed "Mother," there is the sterile quality of schoolmistress to pupil. It would have been inhuman if she had not, at some time or other, resented the fact of him, resented perhaps that there is little romance or glory in the realities of parenthood. And it is helpful to remember Dorothy as a child, so unsure of her own feelings because they never seemed to measure up to the emotional content of literature. In a letter she wrote not long after she had left her son in Ivy Shrimpton's care, Dorothy expressed this ambivalence: "Poor little J.A.—I hardly know whether I love him or hate him. . . ." Perhaps she was never willing to test her feelings, never courageous enough to risk her son's seeming happiness by exposing him to her own conflicted emotions. It was easier, always, to lay off her own reluctance on work or Mac or the pressures of her busy schedule.

Nineteen twenty-eight and 1929 were watershed years for Dorothy and Mac. During the war, Mac had been gassed and suffered shell shock. Although the effects were not immediate (and he had given up the medical pension to which he was entitled), in 1928 his health began to decline, and with it, his earning ability. He no longer had his full-time position with the *News of the World*; his freelance income was unreliable; and he was in arrears on his taxes. There were some food writing assignments, including a cookbook for Crosse and Blackwell, but nothing steady. The Flemings were increasingly reliant on Dorothy's income, which paid for the renovation of the Great James Street apartments and a holiday in Scotland, in addition to John Anthony's support.

Then in September, Dorothy's father—the endlessly patient "Tootles," who had supported her every dream and plan—was gone. At age seventy-four, Reverend Sayers died unexpectedly of pneumonia, "very suddenly, peacefully and mercifully." His death shocked Dorothy, who had never before experienced the loss of a close loved one. She was also confronted with the problem of what to do for her mother and Aunt Mabel Leigh, who would no longer have the Christchurch rectory as a home.

Mac came to the rescue, locating a house called "Sunnyside" at 24 Newland Street in the country town of Witham in Essex. Using money from a legacy, supplemented by a loan from Nell, Dorothy purchased

the house, and Mac managed the move from Christchurch. Dorothy's mother, depressed by the death of her husband, had not been particularly grateful. Dorothy was not especially sympathetic: "He bored her to death for nearly 40 years and she always grumbled that he was no companion for her—and now she misses him dreadfully." Nell's gloominess in turn depressed Mac, but her dark cloud lifted as they settled into Witham, and by Christmas, everyone seemed content with the new accommodations.

Dorothy and Mac continued to find peace on their Scottish holidays amid the artists and fishermen of the towns of Gatehouse on Fleet and Kirkcudbright in Galloway. (Dorothy would set her 1931 Wimsey mystery, *Five Red Herrings*, in these towns and dedicate the novel to Joe Digham, landlord of the Anworth Hotel, where the Flemings stayed.) Dorothy and Mac were in Scotland in July of 1929 when Nell Sayers became ill. She died of complications from a ruptured bowel on July 27. She had survived her husband by less than a year and was buried beside him in the cemetery at Christchurch. For some reason, Dorothy never commissioned stones to mark her parents' graves, though years later, the Reverend Sayers's parishioners placed a memorial plaque to the couple in the church.

Only Aunt Mabel was left, and Ivy quite sensibly wrote to Dorothy with the suggestion that she and her foster children move into Sunnyside to care for the now-octogenarian Mabel. Dorothy demurred; Aunt Mabel, she said, would be upset by the presence of youngsters in the house. In fact, Dorothy and Mac had decided to move permanently to Witham and keep the apartment in London. When Mabel died a year later, Dorothy still made no effort to bring John Anthony into her home.

"But if only there were 48 hours in the day or fewer exciting things to do in the 24! More time, O God, more time!"

By the late 1920s and early 1930s, Dorothy L. Sayers had become a firmly established name in detective fiction. By 1929 she had published four Lord Peter novels and also found a publisher, Victor Gollancz, who suited her extremely well. He had been an employee of Ernest Benn (who had bought out Fisher Unwin), and when Gollancz left to form his own company, Dorothy wanted to join him. She had to wait for a while because Benn would not release her from her contract and continued to publish her novels through *The Documents in the Case* in 1930. Dorothy did, however, pull together *Lord Peter Views the Body*, a collection of twelve short stories, for Gollancz, and also undertook (with

Mac's assistance) the compilation of an anthology titled *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, released as *Omnibus of Crime* in the United States. Her introduction to the anthology has become a classic and is, to this day, one of the best and most readable short critical histories of the genre ever written.

She was working on what became her only non-Wimsey mystery, *The Documents in the Case*, coauthored with Dr. Robert Eustace Barton (pseudonym: Robert Eustace). Dr. Barton had provided scientific expertise for and cowritten mysteries and thrillers with Mrs. L. T. Meade and Edgar Jepson, both of whose works Dorothy included in her *Great Short Stories* collection. Dorothy wrote to Barton, suggesting a collaborative effort for which she would "invent a new detective." The method of the murder and its novel detection were Barton's major contribution, and Dorothy was fascinated by the science that Barton carefully assembled for her. "The religious-scientific aspect of the thing will require careful handling," she wrote to her collaborator, "but ought, I think, to be very interesting to people. . . ." Dorothy did not invent a new detective for *Documents*; she did not include Wimsey or any of his crowd except Sir James Lubbock, the distinguished fictional forensic chemist. She drew her plot from a real-life case—the Thompson-Bywaters murder—and constructed the novel as a series of letters that present the mystery from different first-person perspectives, in homage to Wilkie Collins.

It was around this time that she became involved in the formation of the Detection Club, a group of writers of detective fiction brought together in a confederation of collegial conviviality by Anthony Berkeley Cox. The club was formally launched in 1932, and Dorothy was one of its most enthusiastic members: the creator, or at least the moving hand, behind its semiserious rituals and routines. The club's activities put her in direct contact with a thinker whose theology she had long admired, G. K. Chesterton. In addition to his poetry and a large body of social, literary, and religious criticism, Chesterton was the author of the popular and influential Father Brown mysteries. He was elected first president of the Detection Club and served until his death in 1936. Among the original members were E. C. Bentley (author of *Trent's Last Case*, which Dorothy said greatly influenced her creation of Lord Peter), Agatha Christie, G. D. H. and Margaret Cole (who had once schemed with Dorothy to put together a detective fiction syndicate), Freeman Wills Crofts, R. Austin Freeman, Father Ronald Knox, A. E. W. Mason, Arthur Morrison, Baroness Emmuska Orczy, and John Rhode. Helen Simpson, who was to become one of Dorothy's close friends, was an associate member.

Probably at Victor Gollancz's suggestion, Dorothy also began a pro-

ject that was to occupy her off and on till she died—a biography of Wilkie Collins. In 1929 Benn published her translation of *Tristan in Brittany*, a twelfth-century narrative poem by the Anglo-Norman poet Thomas. (Dorothy had begun the translation after leaving Oxford, under the guidance of her old tutor, Miss Pope. It had been published in the journal of the Modern Language Association, which Dorothy joined in 1919. She would serve as president of this organization in 1939.) Dorothy had never abandoned her scholarly interests and her ambitions to write works of serious import, but detective fiction was her bread and butter, and Lord Peter Wimsey was her meal ticket.

Also at Victor Gollancz's suggestion, Dorothy had engaged a new literary agent, David Higham. Higham worked a small miracle, negotiating a contract with Dorothy's American publisher, Brewer and Warren, that guaranteed her a steady income. She was no longer dependent on advances and royalties. And she could quit Benson's. It was doubtless hard to leave the camaraderie of the agency, but Dorothy had burned out on advertising.

It is remarkable to look at the volume of writings she produced between 1921 and 1930 and realize that, through all this time, she was also working full nine-hour days at Benson's. She learned a great deal during her tenure there, particularly how to read the public mind and public taste. A word lover always, she had also learned, through the daily grind of practical application, the power of persuasive words as weapons for good or ill. Three years later, she would memorialize Benson's and its infamous spiral iron staircase in one of her best mysteries, *Murder Must Advertise*.

Financially, Dorothy was now on her own, although Mac was still working sporadically. He authored, anonymously, a volume of food and dining stories and recipes, *Gourmet's Book of Food and Drink*, published by The Bodley Head in 1933 and dedicated "To my wife, Who can make an Omelette." He wrote another book that was published in 1936 under the pen name Donald Maconochie. (Maconochie was his mother's maiden name.) Though from what little evidence exists, Mac himself wrote dreadful fiction, this book was a guide to novice writers called *The Craft of the Short Story*. The only book Mac published under his own name was *How to See the Battlefields*, a combination of field guide and reportage of his own experiences in the Great War. Published by Cassell and Company in 1919, this book is rare, but those who have seen the text say that it is the work of a very capable journalist.

All of Dorothy's biographers agree that by the early 1930s, Dorothy and Mac's relationship had changed, but exactly how and why is debatable. In *Such a Strange Lady*, Janet Hitchman portrays Mac as a truly despicable character—"a liar, a pretender, a lazy . . . schoolboy who would

never be [Dorothy's] intellectual companion." Hitchman described him as "charming, goodlooking in a slightly decadent way," and "superficially gifted," but lacking even the character to be "an utter rogue . . ."—"just a weak, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' type, looking for a cushy billet."

When Hitchman's book was published in 1975, a number of people came to Mac's defense. One of his daughters even claimed that Mac, not Dorothy, had masterminded the Wimsey novels—a ridiculous assumption. But cooler heads recognized that Mac Fleming, while he was no Prince Charming, was far from the feeble parasite of the Hitchman study. And a number of his failures may have been directly attributable to his wife's behavior.

Mac suffered a constant cough, a legacy from being gassed in the war, as well as high blood pressure, liver problems, and painful arthritis that caused him to limp slightly. As his health worsened, he became increasingly irascible and temperamental. He was a regular at his local pub in Witham and often relied on whiskey for companionship. He spent hours in his studio, painting his rather-good landscapes, or pattered about at home. Soon after Aunt Mabel's death, Dorothy brought another aunt into the Sunnyside household—Alice Maud Bayliss Leigh, the widow of Nell Sayers's brother and mother of Dorothy's childhood companion Margaret Leigh. Aunt Maud, like Aunt Mabel, was very fond of Mac, and during her frequent visits, she often acted as a peacekeeper between the Flemings. Mac enjoyed Aunt Maud's company, and she seemed to have a soothing influence on him. But Mac was becoming forgetful and would go "into such a frightful fit of rage" when reminded of something. Dorothy became concerned. "The doctors," she wrote to Ivy, "say that he is getting definitely queer—but there doesn't seem to be much that one can do about it." The doctors diagnosed most of Mac's ailments as war related, which put Mac in the company of hundreds of thousands of Britons who had been damaged by their service to the nation.

As Mac grew more erratic, Dorothy responded with a curious mixture of solicitude and annoyance. Late in 1933, during a holiday with Muriel St. Clare Byrne, she seriously considered leaving Mac, but for a variety of reasons—among which her religious principles must have ranked high—she decided against a separation. She had made the marriage; she would hold it together. Dorothy always felt great affection for her husband, but she may not have grasped the unique psychological difficulties facing a moderately talented and intelligent man married to a gifted, famous, and self-assertive woman. She seems to have compartmentalized Mac, as she so often compartmentalized troublesome things in her life. She usually left him behind when she went to London on business or for her own pleasure, and kept him away from her business

associates, as she had excluded him from contact with her Benson's friends. In the house at Witham, they often passed like ships at night, eating lunch and dinner together but otherwise occupying their time in separate pursuits. People who did not know Mac well often blamed his drinking for the troubles; reliable observers who were familiar with the Witham household were not so sure.

Close friends later expressed their belief that Mac and Dorothy had simply reached the point of getting on one another's nerves. In Witham, they shared the same house day and night and could not help but get in each other's way. It has been reported that they had separate bedrooms, as if that were clear evidence of estrangement, but in *Busman's Honeymoon*, Dorothy gave Peter and Harriet Wimsey separate bedrooms even in the midst of their erotic honeymoon. It has also been said that the Flemings were not physically affectionate, but Dorothy always avoided touching and public displays like the plague.

She repeatedly implied that Mac was the cause of her failure to claim John Anthony as her own, but there is at least circumstantial evidence that *she* was the stumbling block. Adoption had become legal in England in 1926, but in order to adopt, Dorothy would be required to produce her child's birth certificate in court, revealing the secret of his birth. This she would not do, even after the deaths of her parents and when she had attained sufficient public stature to weather a scandal. (She did make some kind of formal arrangement, for she later told John Anthony that her lawyers had copies of his "adoption papers.") Was Mac the problem, as she repeatedly hinted in her letters to Ivy Shrimpton? Or was she?

Today, Mac might well be right to complain of mixed signals from his wife. In a 1976 interview, Muriel Byrne remembered Mac once asking, "What can I do to please her? She doesn't think I love her, but I do. Nothing I do seems to make any difference."* Did Dorothy want him in or out of her life? As James Brabazon writes, "Mac . . . was all very well up to a point, but he was not the man she really wanted to marry." But whom had she wanted? John Cournos? Eric Whelpton? Her old Bach Choir conductor, Hugh Allen? They all, sooner or later, failed to meet her standards. Could any man of flesh and bone have satisfied Dorothy's fiction-bred longing for an all-consuming passion that also left her free to pursue her own interests and goals without interference?

There was one such man, of course: he belonged wholly to Dorothy, and she could make him do exactly as she desired.

* From notes taken in an interview conducted by Lt. Col. R. C. Clarke, August 22, 1976. Quoted by Trevor H. Hall in *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Studies*.

"Fair and Mayfair"

In 1936, Dorothy wrote an article explaining the origin of Lord Peter Death Bredon Wimsey. She said that when she needed a detective, he quite simply walked into her imagination and applied for the job. But rigorous literary sleuths have uncovered a more complicated story.

Lord Peter seems to have been forming himself in Dorothy's mind for some time before she sat down to craft her first novel. Probably in 1920, he made his first appearance in an outline she developed for a Sexton Blake short story: he is already listed in *Who's Who*, and a character describes him thus: "Younger son of the Duke of Peterborough. . . . Distinguished himself in the war. Rides his own horse in the Grand National. Authority on first editions. . . . Fair-haired, big nose, aristocratic sort of man whose socks match his tie. No politics." Dorothy had already located him in Piccadilly and at the center of a murder, though Peter was only a secondary character. As Barbara Reynolds points out, Dorothy may well have sketched out this story while she was still living in France, drawing on the characteristics of Eric Whelpton and the anecdotes of London high life told by Charles Crichton. Not long after, Dorothy wrote several pages of ideas for a play she entitled *The Mousehole: A Detective Fantasia in Three Flats*, and here he is again: "Lord Peter Wimsey. Thirty-two, unmarried; no occupation; residence, first floor; hobby, other people's business."

When Dorothy got her idea for the plot of a mystery novel that became *Whose Body?*, she had already put in a good deal of time on her highborn detective. She drew on a variety of sources, both real and literary. Lord Peter was part Eric Whelpton: young man of the world, speaks French like a native, war veteran, attractive to women. He shared some of the experiences of Charles Crichton: London bachelor flat, fast-lane lifestyle, loyal batman-valet. In attitude, he owed mightily to Philip Trent, the hero of E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, the groundbreaking 1913 novel that is generally credited as the first to successfully humanize and "humorize" the fictional detective. He acquired not a few of his original "silly ass" mannerisms from Bertie Wooster, the popular upper-class nitwit of P. G. Wodehouse's beloved comic novels. There is even something of Baroness Orczy's Scarlet Pimpernel about him.

Lord Peter inherited his distinctive physiognomy from a real young man whom Dorothy had never met but had seen once during an Oxford degree ceremony she attended during her college days: he was the recipient of the Newgate Prize and read a poem on Oxford. She had written immediately to a friend that "Charis [Barnett] and I fell head over ears in love with him on the spot. His name is Maurice Roy Ridley—isn't it a killing name, like the hero of a six-penny novelette? He

has just gone down from Balliol, so I shall see him no more. My loves are always unsatisfactory, as you know." Whether she remembered this exact occasion or not, Roy Ridley had taken up lodging in her mind, to reappear in the physical person of Lord Peter. Dorothy did, in fact, encounter Ridley again, when she was giving a lecture at Oxford in 1935. Afterward, she wrote to Muriel Byrne, with whom she was then plotting the play of *Busman's Honeymoon*, "I have seen the *perfect* Peter Wimsey. Height, voice, charm, smile, manner, outline of features, *everything*—and he is—THE CHAPLAIN OF BALLIOL!!!" (Ridley later became John Anthony Fleming's tutor at Balliol College and irritated Dorothy with his frequent claims to be the model of Lord Peter.)

But Lord Peter is most indebted to his creator; underlying all else is a fictional hero very much like herself in character and personality. Perhaps that is why he survives, and why Dorothy survives through him. Author and hero are like two sides of the same coin—intelligent, well educated, lovers of language and music, superficially rebellious and coarse but intensely loyal to tradition and duty, secretive, lusty, arrogant yet also self-doubting, and capable to a remarkable degree of separating their lives into convenient compartments. They are both, to use a phrase from Dorothy's schoolgirl days, "weird freaks" within conventional settings.

Peter Wimsey is an unusual serial detective because he not only ages on lines parallel to his creator; he develops and matures with age. When Peter made his first public appearance in 1923, he was thirty-two; Dorothy was thirty. In his last fictional outing, the 1942 short story "Talboys," Peter is fifty-two; Dorothy was almost fifty. He began his fictional life as a prattling and somewhat effete man of noble birth and seemingly unlimited resources,* "Fair and Mayfair," full of nervous energy and facile interests. In his last appearance, he is happily and faithfully married after a long and emotionally exhausting courtship, his pleasures now focused on his wife and three young sons. Few Golden Age writers tried, much less succeeded as Dorothy did, in creating central characters whose personal development is fully as interesting as any of the crimes they solve.

Though she later claimed that Lord Peter's first outing was written "with the avowed intention of producing something 'less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel,'" Dorothy wrote her detective fiction primarily to make money; she regarded Lord Peter as first and foremost a means to meet her obligations until she earned the fi-

* Dorothy said that she endowed Peter with great wealth in part because she had none of her own and could enjoy his free-spending lifestyle vicariously.

nancial security to write the serious works that were her prime objective. But it was impossible for her to divorce the creation from the creator. She simply was incapable of inventing a Lord Peter who was solely her breadwinner. He had to be real to her first, then to the people who bought her books. He could not remain static: the Peter Wimsey who interested her when she was thirty could not have held her attention two decades later.

In fact, by 1930, when she wrote *Documents in the Case* with Dr. Barton and deliberately left Wimsey out, she was losing interest in her chief character. In her next book, *Strong Poison*, she introduced Peter to the love of his life, Harriet Vane (her most autobiographical female character). Harriet is only sketchily developed in this book, largely because she was intended as nothing more than a device to free Dorothy from her attachment to Lord Peter. Dorothy didn't want to kill her profitable detective; she wanted to put him aside by marrying him off. Marriage, she reasoned, would logically bring Lord Peter's private investigation to a halt and also allow the author to revive him, if need be, at some future time. But when she came to the end of *Strong Poison*, Dorothy discovered that the curious relationship she had created between Harriet and Peter could not end happily ever after in this book. Almost in spite of herself, Dorothy had raised Peter to a new level of interest; her old bon vivant sleuth, once so footloose and fancy-free, had become a man in love, stricken with a new purpose and the stirrings of a new seriousness. Such is real life.

Some critics, pointing to the four Peter-and-Harriet novels and particularly to the perceived failures of *Gaudy Night*, her next-to-last, have accused Dorothy of ruining the Wimsey books by falling in love with her hero. It is sometimes suggested that what she failed to find in Mac Fleming, she fantasized in Peter Wimsey, and there may be some truth in this carping. Certainly Peter in the later novels comes closer to the type of man she envisioned for herself than any of her real-life loves. But as psychology has been telling us for some time, romantic fantasy is a perfectly normal adjunct to love and sex—and to fiction.

It was not long after *Strong Poison* that Dorothy got the itch to write her memoirs, and she began *My Edwardian Childhood*. She didn't work at it for too long before returning to a new Lord Peter project and her Wilkie Collins biography. Two years later, however, she transformed the work she had done on the memoir into the opening chapters of a proposed "straight"—and autobiographical—novel that she titled *Cat o' Mary: The Biography of a Prig*, to be published under the pen name Johanna Leigh. She eventually completed two hundred pages of revealing and self-flagellating writing, and in 1934 her publishers announced the forthcoming publication in the trade press. Then she dropped it.

In the process of developing the story of Katherine Lammas—Dorothy's alter ego in *Cat o'Mary*—the author had learned something about herself and what she valued in life. *My Edwardian Childhood* and *Cat o'Mary* had been cathartic exercises. Through them, she discovered both what, at age forty-one, she wanted to say and how to say it. There was no longer any need for memoir or autobiographical fiction. She had already invented a character who could express her ideas about love and work and the complicated business of remaining true to one's self. It was not Peter Wimsey.

Harriet Vane—a character conceived to serve a specific, onetime purpose and based, more for convenience than any deeper motive, on the author herself—would be Dorothy's voice. Her vehicle would be the dense, difficult, often self-indulgent and annoying, sometimes soaring, intellectually challenging, erotically charged *Gaudy Night*.

"On the intellectual platform, alone of all others, Harriet could stand free and equal with Peter. . ."

—"*Gaudy Night*," a 1937 essay

Between *Strong Poison* and *Gaudy Night*, Dorothy was hardly idle. She wrote three Wimsey novels—*The Five Red Herrings*, *Murder Must Advertise*, and the work that many readers regard as her finest mystery, *The Nine Tailors*—that feature Peter alone. (Harriet is referred to, though not by name, in one sentence in *Murder Must Advertise*.) In 1932, Dorothy had returned to Peter and Harriet in *Have His Carcase*, expanding on their relationship but getting them no nearer to the marriage bed than at the end of *Strong Poison*.

The Nine Tailors was a difficult and time-intensive project; in order to meet her contractual obligations, Dorothy interrupted her work on it to write *Murder Must Advertise*. To prepare for *Tailors*, Dorothy immersed herself in the study of the arcane art of bell ringing, which forms one of the core events of the story. There is much of Bluntisham and more of Christchurch, her father's two parishes, in the novel's country village of Fenchurch St. Paul, its inhabitants, and its environs. She created, with the assistance of architect W. J. Redhead, an entire church that is, in Lord Peter's words, "like a young cathedral." Dorothy also delved into the engineering of the intricate system of dams and drainage canals, whose fictitious failure precipitates the book's final, dramatic flood sequence. Her attention to detail was meticulous, and she was "sinfully proud" that bell-ringing experts could find only "three small technical errors" in the finished novel.

The book ranged farther and wider than any of her previous novels

and was more subtly layered than anything else she had written. It works as murder mystery; it works as serious novel of manners. Wimsey, who is involved in the criminal action by sheer chance, displayed a new depth and purpose. Gone was much of the giddy flippancy that previously characterized his behavior. He had settled more comfortably into the role of mature man of conscience. But Dorothy's ultimate achievement in *The Nine Tailors* was the creation of a character who overshadowed even Wimsey: the Reverend Theodore Venables. Though Dorothy said that the country rector and his wife were not directly based on Henry and Nell Sayers, they stand as a fitting tribute paid by a willful daughter to her good and patient parents. Dorothy called this book a "labour of love," and in it she perhaps made some kind of peace with her childhood.

The Nine Tailors—which owes its inspiration to a 1903 novel, *The Nebuly Coat* by John Meade Falkner, and its broad concept to Dorothy's study of Wilkie Collins—was an immediate success with critics and readers and pushed its author into celebrityhood. Her opinions were solicited by the press. She was hired by *The Sunday Times* to review detective fiction. She was elected as a charter member of the Sherlock Holmes Society. She became a sought-after speaker. The effects of this new public status on her marriage were predictable: kept out of his wife's limelight, Mac became more difficult, at times deliberately sabotaging Dorothy's schedule and plans. He was now the shadowy appendage of a famous wife, and it hurt. On one occasion, he stormed out of Witham's Red Lion pub, usually so welcome a retreat, when someone pointed him out as "Dorothy Sayers's husband." Dorothy persevered, humoring his whims and moods, yet all the while creating an increasingly separate life for herself.

In June of 1934, six months after the publication of *The Nine Tailors*, Dorothy was invited back to Somerville College to participate in a gaudy dinner honoring Mildred Pope. (In Britain, "gaudy" refers to a celebratory occasion, especially college reunions.) In her academic robes, Dorothy toasted not only her old French tutor but Oxford itself and "some of the noblest things for which this University stands: the integrity of judgment that gain cannot corrupt; the humility in the face of the facts that self-esteem cannot blind; the generosity of a great mind that is eager to give praise to others; the singleness of purpose that pursues knowledge as some men pursue glory and that will not be contented with the second-hand or the second-best."

The gaudy was pivotal: it gave her the answer to the problem of Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. In *Strong Poison*, Peter had met and fallen in love with Harriet when she was on trial for the murder of her ex-lover. In *Have His Carcase*, Harriet had called him in to solve a murder,

and amid the sleuthing, their relationship had become more believable and complex. But Dorothy had loaded Harriet with an immense weight of self-doubt and guilt. (She was, after all, a sullied woman, having lived in sin and been publicly humiliated in the dock of the Old Bailey.) Though drawn to Peter, Harriet resists his endless proposals, fearing that to accept him will be an act of gratitude rather than love, fearing that he will be unable to put aside the memory of her love affair, and fearing that she will damage his social position and alienate his family. In fact, by the conclusion of *Have His Carcase*, Harriet seems intractably mired in her neurotic love-fear relationship with her ardent suitor. As Dorothy wrote in a 1937 essay about *Gaudy Night*, "[Harriet's] inferiority complex was making her steadily more brutal to him and his newly developed psychology was making him steadily more sensitive to her inhibitions."

To dig Harriet out of her passive-aggressive hole and move the affair forward, Dorothy needed a catalytic event that would suit the two human natures she had concocted. A simple homicide was not sufficient. What Dorothy did was send Harriet back to Oxford, to a reunion at Shrewsbury College (an invented version of Somerville, which she "built," as she had the church in *The Nine Tailors*, with the help of an architect and located on the cricket field of Balliol College). There is a mystery, nasty but not fatal, that serves to get Peter and Harriet together and throw suspicion on the faculty of the college. But *Gaudy Night* is really an intellectual romance in which the detection is only a means to push the plot along. The focus of the story is Harriet, as she comes to terms with herself so she can come to terms with Peter.

Gaudy Night was, and remains, Dorothy's most argued-about novel. When published in 1936, it won both praise and searing criticism, most particularly in a review by Q. D. Leavis. Mrs. Leavis attacked Dorothy's book basically for its phony literariness and its false picture of university life as intellectually pure. She accused Dorothy of writing "rationalized nostalgia" for her own college days, and Dorothy felt the full sting of that slap. Readers who were used to clever plotting and criminality in their Lord Peter stories were inevitably disappointed. In his study of detective fiction, *Bloody Murder*, critic Julian Symons said that "*Gaudy Night* is essentially a 'woman's novel' full of the most tedious pseudo-serious chat. . . ." At least one female reader wrote to the author that Lord Peter had lost his "elfin charm," to which Dorothy replied "that any man who retained elfin charm at the age of forty-five should be put in a lethal chamber." To others, Dorothy seemed to have plummeted, finally, over the edge of her superiority complex. (The book requires of the reader a more-than-passing familiarity with English and French literature and Latin construction. Dorothy also had a habit of writing her sexiest passages in French, and not providing translations. And in order to

comprehend the novel's closing, and crucial, passage, the reader must know Latin *and* the rituals of the Oxford University degree awarding ceremony.*) Even latterday feminists, who have adopted Dorothy as a kind of minor saint, see the book as a sellout of the principles of independent womanhood.

Regardless, the book did very well, and it satisfied its author. Dorothy was notorious for the funks she fell into following the completion of her novels. Once done with a book of detection, she invariably hated it and bemoaned her failure to achieve her literary objectives. But when she turned *Gaudy Night* over to Victor Gollancz in September 1934, she said that "it's the book I wanted to write and I've written it. . . ." She understood that *Gaudy Night* would be difficult to market (leaving it up to Gollancz whether to promote it "as a love-story, or as educational propaganda, or as a lunatic freak"). It might flop, but she was satisfied.

While working on her Oxford love story, Dorothy also undertook what was to be her final full-blown Lord Peter project. It started with a totally unrelated incident at home in Witham. A chimney sweep was called into Sunnyside, and he arrived wearing layer upon layer of colorful knitted sweaters. As he worked, the heavy layers were successively peeled away. When Dorothy visited her friends Muriel Byrne and Marjorie Barber a few days later in London, she regaled them with the story of the stripping sweep and remarked what a fine stage character he would make. Muriel took her up on the idea.

For several years, Muriel had helped Dorothy sift through proposals to put Lord Peter on stage, but no one else's ideas had ever been acceptable. The time had come, Muriel argued, for Dorothy to do the job herself. Dorothy agreed, so long as Muriel, an experienced producer of amateur theater who was then teaching at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, would coauthor. So while Dorothy was knee-deep in *Gaudy Night*, she and Muriel began the comedy of detection that takes up near the point at which *Gaudy Night* ends, with the newly married Lord and Lady Peter on their wedding trip. As Dorothy was getting her novel couple engaged, she was also plotting their stage marriage, and at times the marriage ran well ahead of the courtship.

The play was accepted by producer Anmer Hall, and rehearsals began

* For those who are not Latinists or Oxford graduates, Peter and Harriet's final *Gaudy Night* dialog is taken from the traditional degree confirmation at Oxford. An official of the university asks, "Placetne?" (Does it please?), to which the graduate responds, "Placet." (It pleases.) Another tradition—echoed in the final line of the book—is that as degrees are presented, proctors walk among those attending the ceremony so that anyone who objects to a particular degree candidate can register his complaint by pulling at the sleeve of the proctor's academic robe.

in November 1936, with Dennis Arundell and Veronica Turleigh cast as Peter and Harriet. Dorothy was at last in the real world of the theater, and just as she had thrown herself heart and soul into her backyard productions of *The Three Musketeers* so many years before at the Bluntisham rectory, she jumped into the production of *Busman's Honeymoon*, traveling to the tryouts, mothering the cast, refining and improving the dialog. Her dedication was rewarded on December 16, 1936, when the play opened at the Comedy Theatre in London's West End. *Busman's Honeymoon* was generally well reviewed and enjoyed a successful nine-month run. The novel that Dorothy developed from the play was published the following year.

Dorothy planned at least one more "Lord Peter," leaving behind the opening chapters and plot outline for a book she called *Thrones, Dominations* (completed some sixty years later by Jill Paton Walsh and published in 1998). But there would be no more full-length adventures for her "Fair and Mayfair" detective. She wrote two more Wimsey short stories: "The Haunted Policeman," which is set on the night of the birth of Peter and Harriet's first son, and "Talboys," which takes place seven years and three children into the Wimsey marriage. During World War Two, Dorothy put together a series of patriotic Wimsey family letters that were published in the *Spectator* magazine. But to all intents and purposes, the 1937 appearance of *Busman's Honeymoon* under hardcover was the end of the saga.

In her late forties, Dorothy was literally fat and happier than she had been in years. For all its many flaws, *Gaudy Night* had been an act of personal exploration and expiation, allowing her to determine where her true purpose—her "proper work"—lay, and *Busman's Honeymoon* had provided a kind of joyful denouement to the first quarter-century of her public career. There was much more work ahead, but work of a very different sort.

" . . . their salvation is in themselves and in each separate man and woman among them. . . ."

In October of 1936, an offer came Dorothy's way that was to redirect her career and her life. Margaret Babington, organizer of the Canterbury Festival of Canterbury Cathedral, contacted Dorothy to ask if the mystery novelist would be interested in writing a play for the annual event. Dorothy must have been stunned. Her one play, *Busman's Honeymoon*, had not even reached the stage, yet here she was being offered what every playwright dreams of: a commission to do a play that was guaranteed performance. She would be in excellent company. The pre-

vious two Canterbury Festival plays had been T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Charles Williams's *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*. Dorothy had been recommended to the Festival Committee by Charles Williams, but still, the choice of a popular detective fiction writer seemed odd, even to Dorothy. There were plenty of experienced stage writers in England, but, as James Brabazon points out, the number of playwrights who were "competent, distinguished and Christian" was limited.

Dorothy was no theologian, but she was as firmly grounded in theology as anyone. She believed in the traditional Christian church—the Catholic church of history—and its doctrines, particularly the doctrine of the Incarnation. She also related human creativity to doctrine, believing that God created man to be creative.

The theme of the 1937 Canterbury Festival—a celebration of artists and craftsmen—naturally attracted her, and after some initial hesitation, Dorothy agreed to the project. She was soon deep into her new play, which she built on the story of twelfth-century architect William of Sens, who had rebuilt the Cathedral choir after a disastrous fire. The theme and her choice of subject allowed her to expand on ideas about the nature of work and creativity that she had already explored in *Gaudy Night*. The title of the play, *The Zeal of Thy House*, was taken from a verse in the book of Psalms.

Colorfully staged in the Canterbury chapel, *Zeal* was first performed on June 12, 1937, and reaction was excellent. Dorothy was joined by a trainload of friends,* including Muriel Byrne, Dorothy Rowe, Helen Simpson and her husband, Marjorie Barber, and Aunt Maud Leigh. Mac Fleming did not attend, perhaps for health reasons.

The Zeal of Thy House was Dorothy's first move into a new and not altogether comfortable role as Christian apologist. For the next decade, her published output consisted almost exclusively of plays, essays, and theologically based books. She was engaged to write a second Festival play for Canterbury, a uniquely Sayers variation on the Faust legend titled *The Devil to Pay* that debuted in June 1939. In 1938, she was commissioned to write a nativity play for the BBC's "Children's Hour" radio

* Dorothy had lost contact with her good friend Muriel Jaeger by this time, though "Jim" had been instrumental in getting Dorothy to complete her first novel. An explanation may be inferred from a letter that Dorothy wrote to Dr. Bustace Barton in 1928, while she was working on *The Documents in the Case*. Dorothy had asked the scientist about the subject of homosexuality, and he supplied some information and recommended reading. In her reply, Dorothy wrote of a friend who "won't see, speak or write to me now I'm married, because marriage revolts her." Dr. Barbara Reynolds, who has collected and edited Dorothy's letters, speculates that this friend was Muriel Jaeger.

program, a venture that set the stage for one of her most powerful achievements two years later.

She wrote a light romantic comedy, *Love All*, in 1940, but this play never reached the London stage. Dorothy, however, was already submerged in the war effort. She had volunteered her services to the War Office and been appointed to the Authors' Planning Committee of the Ministry of Information. But Dorothy Sayers and government bureaucrats mixed like fire and ice, and she was deemed "difficult and loquacious"* and dropped from the Ministry's list of authors. Although she was eventually invited back by the committee, Dorothy was not one to take any criticism lightly, and she refused.

Her eleven Wimsey letters appeared in the *Spectator* between November 1939 and January 1940. These letters purported to be from various members of the Wimsey family to Lord Peter, who was serving "somewhere in Europe." Although most of the letters were lighthearted morale boosters for the folks on the home front, the final letter, from Peter to Harriet, expressed Dorothy's deep concern about the nature of individual freedom and individual responsibility. In Peter's voice, she exhorted:

Tell them [the British people], this is a battle of a new kind, and it is they who have to fight it, and they must do it themselves and alone. They must not continually ask for leadership—they must lead themselves. This is a war against submission to leadership, and we might quite easily win it in the field and yet lose it in our own country. . . .

It's not enough to rouse up the Government to do this and that. You must rouse the people. You must make them understand that their salvation is in themselves and in each separate man and woman among them. . . .

—Wimsey Papers XI, January 26, 1940

Dorothy, like all her countrymen, worried about the progress of the war. She and Mac took a young evacuee from London into their Witham home for two years. (That the child enjoyed his long stay must in some way be a credit to Mac.) She sheltered her friends' cats as well as her own, and worried about a possible bombardment. She knitted endless pairs of woolen socks for sailors. She was gentle with Mac, whose moods and outbursts were still unpredictable.

But Dorothy could be a harridan, venting her temper in truly obnoxious and irrational ways. The most flagrant example came when she

* An internal memorandum quoted by James Brabazon.

was commissioned by Reverend Dr. J. W. Welch, director of Religious Broadcasting, to develop and write a series of half-hour radio plays on the life of Christ for the BBC's *Children's Hour*. Dorothy agreed but was immediately on her guard against any interference in her work by the BBC bureaucrats. She was unhappy when production of the plays was assigned to Derek McCulloch, the director of the Children's Hour Department; she wanted Val Gielgud, with whom she had worked very well on her earlier radio program, the 1938 nativity play. Regardless, she met McCulloch and seemed satisfied. When she submitted her first script in the series, she received a generally glowing response, not from McCulloch, who was unavailable, but from his assistant director, May Jenkin. Miss Jenkin's letter was in all ways civil and laudatory but contained some concerns about language that might be too sophisticated for an audience of children and discreetly asked permission to edit the script.

Dorothy L. Sayers hit the roof. She fired off letters to Dr. Welch and Derek McCulloch. She threatened, she hectored, she insulted with condescension. Dr. Welch, an apparent master of diplomacy, finally managed to calm the situation. But Miss Jenkin, an experienced radio producer, chose to defend herself against Dorothy's personal attacks. (Dorothy had accused her, among other things, of impertinence, tactlessness and literary ignorance.) She wrote directly to Dorothy and received in return an envelope containing a terse note and the torn-up pieces of Dorothy's contract.

The impasse was eventually resolved by Dr. Welch. The series of plays, given the overall title *The Man Born to Be King*, was moved out of the Children's Hour Department, and Val Gielgud was assigned to produce. But May Jenkin, who had behaved professionally throughout, was to be avenged in a way, when the tables were turned on Dorothy.

Shortly before the finished series was set to air, Dorothy participated in a press conference and read a statement to the assembled journalists that addressed two key issues: the use of an actor to play the role of Jesus and the adoption of modern-day idiomatic speech. She also read a short passage from one of the plays. The next day's headline in the *Daily Mail* shouted, "BBC 'Life of Christ' Play in US Slang." Religious conservatives—particularly the Protestant Truth Society and The Lord's Day Observance Society—were incensed. Public protest rained down; there were questions in Parliament; some even blamed the Japanese capture of Singapore on the BBC's blasphemies.

Dorothy, who had spent so many years in advertising, appreciated the value of publicity, but this uproar had quickly gotten out of control, and the situation depressed her. It was now *her* work being unfairly judged, and she bemoaned the stupidity of willfully ignorant people. Still, she

was prepared to fight, especially when the Bishop of Winchester expressed concerns again about her choice of language. But when the series finally aired, the tide turned, and *The Man Born to Be King* was greeted as a major achievement. Letters of gratitude and congratulations poured in. Dorothy was gracious in success and paid tribute to Dr. Welch, Val Gielgud, and all the cast and crew she worked with on the final production. She now jokingly referred to her earlier temper tantrum as "the Battle of the Scripts" and refrained from referring to Miss Jenkin at all.

Some time afterward, Dr. Welch recommended Dorothy for an extraordinary honor, the Lambeth Degree of Doctor of Divinity. When the degree was offered by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dorothy was deeply torn. Certainly it was a prestigious recognition of her work and her intellectual achievements, and if she accepted, she would be the first woman to receive a Lambeth Degree. But she worried that a degree in divinity did not suit: ". . . I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian," she wrote to the Archbishop in a rare mood of humility. "I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an intellectual pattern." She may also have been troubled, as James Brabazon speculates, by the awareness of her own secret sin and by the prospect of discovery of her son's existence. Dorothy was an intellectual Christian, but she admitted that the only truth she knew and accepted through personal experience was the existence of sin. After some soul-searching, she declined the Lambeth Degree.

Still, Dorothy and her opinions were in great demand, especially in the religious and scholarly communities. In 1941, she published what many believe to be her masterwork, *The Mind of the Maker*, the first in a proposed series of books by different authors. This "Bridgeheads" series was abandoned after only three books were published, but *The Mind of the Maker* remains a powerful and challenging essay on the creative process. Scholars of her work tend to agree that this book, which links the three broad phases of artistic creation to the doctrine of the Trinity, is her most original work and most important contribution to literary and theological criticism.

Dorothy had become identified with a small group of influential lay Christian apologists that included C. S. Lewis, T. S. Eliot, and Charles Williams. She corresponded with all three (leading Lewis to proclaim her one of the great letter-writers of the century), but she established a special relationship with Williams. It was Williams who helped to change the course of her career with his recommendation to the Canterbury Festival Committee in 1936. He may also have influenced her

personal life by challenging her sense of intellectual superiority. He certainly introduced her to her last great love.

As illustrated by the altercation with May Jenkin and the BBC, Dorothy could be monstrously hostile and unjust to those who questioned her God-given right to be right. It was a lifelong pattern, perhaps exacerbated by the onset of menopause, but few dared to risk her wrath with confrontation. One who did was the gentle Charles Williams, a writer and lay scholar who, in James Brabazon's words, "seemed . . . to understand in his blood and bones the [spiritual] truths of which the laws were merely man-made formulations." Writing to Dorothy in 1943 and 1944, Williams raised the troubling issue of the separation of intellectual Christianity from real-world application. "I darkly suspected," he wrote, "that you and I were both dangerously near coming under judgement. The temptation of thinking that the business of writing frees one from everything else is very profound. . . ."* In his subtle and generous way, Williams had put his finger on Dorothy's weak spot: her belief that her "proper job" was the intellectual explication of Christian dogma. Was she using, as he suggested in another letter, "the byways of the literary mind" as an "excuse" to avoid personal responsibility? Brabazon speculates that her contact with Charles Williams had a powerful impact, possibly allowing her own doubts to surface. Her behavior did change at about this time, as the seething intolerance of others receded and a gentler Dorothy began to emerge.

Her second debt to Williams was her introduction to the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri, whom she often quoted but had never read. It was Williams's critical work *The Figure of Beatrice* that opened Dorothy's eyes and mind to the great Italian poet. It was a German air raid that launched her on the project that would occupy her until her death. Retreating to a shelter during a bombardment of London, she took a copy of Dante's *Inferno* with her. Though she had to stumble her way through the original Italian, the encounter was life-altering. As she said later, "I can remember nothing like it since I first read *The Three Musketeers* at the age of thirteen. . . ." She soon contracted with Penguin Classics to do a new translation (after teaching herself medieval Italian) of the entire *Commedia*, and though she continued other projects, Dante was to be her most constant companion for the next dozen years. Here was the final intellectual romance—a man centuries dead whom she could "fight with," battling every step of the way to bring to life in modern English the rich, earthy, exuberant brilliance she discovered in his words.

*Quoted by James Brabazon in *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*.

"He seems to be turning out a good sort of kid, and I'm disposed to like him. . . ."

For all her professional activity, Dorothy's dedication to her son's welfare was unwavering. In 1935 she and Mac had made some kind of adoption arrangement, and John Anthony was instructed that he should address Dorothy as "Mother" and Mac as "Father." Henceforth his surname would be Fleming.

Dorothy knew that the time had come to prepare her son for formal education, and with Ivy, she arranged for him to attend a small boy's school that would provide the tutoring he needed to be accepted by a good secondary school (as her father had so often tutored boys at his rectory in Bluntisham). At twelve, John Anthony was sent off to a rectory school in Somerset. When the headmaster died, the boy was transferred briefly to a school in Devon, then to a school in Broadstairs, Kent, that passed Dorothy's rigorous inspection.

They corresponded fairly often, and sometimes Dorothy met her son when he changed trains in London, treating him to shopping and sight-seeing. Her letters are punctuated with congratulations and encouragement, for John Anthony was an able student, and she was always solicitous of his needs, stretching her budget to see that he could take piano and riding lessons. John Anthony won a scholarship to Malvern College (prep school), where he began to show a serious interest in writing and also an aptitude for mathematics. When the boy had difficulty with history, perhaps from an inherited lack of interest, Dorothy wrote with understanding that "it is a difficult subject to make much of, or take much interest in, until one grows up—and then it suddenly becomes enthralling, and one wishes one had done more about it in one's school-days."* Early in 1939, John Anthony sought her advice about his future academic course: writing and the humanities or math and science. Dorothy was reassuring, offering the advice that she believed in so intensely for herself: "Of one thing you can be sure: if you are a creator in any particular medium, you will end by discovering the fact. Nothing can prevent the genuine creator from creating or from creating in his own proper medium."

In 1941, John Anthony won a scholarship to Balliol College at Oxford, but he wrote to his mother about the possibility of deferring his

* Dorothy retained her girlhood bias against the teachers of history well into adulthood. In *Gaudy Night*, the only objectionable scholar is the history don, Miss Hilliard, who hates Harriet Vane with a distorted passion that has nothing to do with scholarship.

education to take up some kind of war work. Her response was as even-handed as possible, and she left the decision to him. John Anthony opted to postpone Oxford, and he joined the Technical Branch of the Royal Air Force. He did not "go up" to Balliol until 1945 and completed his studies in 1948, taking, as his mother had, a First Class degree. In her congratulatory note to him, she enclosed money for a holiday.

She had done it. She had seen to it that her son was reared to full adulthood, given every opportunity that he deserved, and sheltered always from the public shame of his birth. Dorothy never directly admitted to him that she was his real mother. She had denied herself all the potential joys of parenthood, and avoided most of its messes and terrors and disappointments. She had purged her great sin, and it was time to move on with her "proper job."

Following his graduation, Dorothy and her son grew apart, which is hardly unusual in any parent-child relationship when the child is in his twenties. John Anthony White had matured into Anthony Fleming and was ready for the responsibilities of adulthood. It is likely, too, that Dorothy wanted to avoid the questions that every grown man has a right to ask about his paternity and his heritage. Anthony had suspected that Dorothy was his mother at least since his early adolescence; his suspicions were later confirmed when he got his birth certificate in order to apply for a passport. But there is no indication that he ever confronted Dorothy with his knowledge of the truth.

The first volume of Dorothy's Dante translation, *Hell*, was published in 1949. A year later, she lost her husband of twenty-four years. Mac had been in and out of the hospital several times for coronary artery disease, and on June 9, 1950, he suffered a stroke that was instantly fatal. He was sixty-nine. He was cremated, and following his wishes, his remains were taken to rest in his family's ancestral homeland. His attending physician scattered Mac's ashes in the churchyard of the town of Biggar in Scotland. Appropriately, the church was located next door to a pub, The Fleming Arms. Dorothy did not accompany Mac on his final journey, but perhaps to her own surprise, she missed his presence in her life. She wrote to Muriel Byrne, "It will seem very queer without Mac. I shall miss having him to look after, and there will be no one to curse me and keep me up to the mark!" To another friend, Dorothy lamented, "It seems impossible that there should be so many uninterrupted hours in the day."

Nine months later, there was another loss, one that drew Dorothy together with her son once more. Ivy Shrimpton died, leaving her worldly goods to Dorothy—about £4,000, which Dorothy gave to Anthony. He handled the funeral arrangements and purchased the burial plot in Banbury for the woman who was always the closest he had to a real mother.

Dorothy went on with her life, filling it with old friends and new. She was now president of the Detection Club and ran it, some complained, like a drill sergeant. She also became involved in establishing St. Anne's House in London, an often contentious but worthy project designed to provide common ground for the expression and discussion of Christian and secular ideas. St. Anne's was in part an action taken to address the serious concerns Dorothy had long held about the nature and organization of postwar society and the proper role of the Church. It was through St. Anne's that she became friends with James Brabazon. Her relationship with Barbara Reynolds, a lecturer in Italian at Cambridge University, began when Reynolds arranged for Dorothy to deliver a talk on Dante—a meeting that ultimately led to a close personal and professional friendship. (Dr. Reynolds was to complete Dorothy's translation of Dante.) Some of her old crowd were gone—Helen Simpson and Charles Williams—but others were as close as ever: Muriel Byrne, Marjorie Barber, Dorothy Rowe. She had long been friends with Norah Lambourne, a set and costume designer whom Dorothy worked with on several of her plays, including her last, *The Emperor Constantine*, staged at the Colchester Festival in 1951.

Dorothy could still rise to a good fight and did so with some regularity, taking on scholars, critics, and the occasional unfortunate politician or bureaucrat. She could still shock with her costuming, adopting a mannish style of dress that led to wholly wrong suppositions about her sexuality. She still took enormous pleasure in her physical appetites: good foods, good wines, and endless cigarettes. And there was also her Dante. The second book, *Purgatory*, was published in 1955, and by the end of 1956, she was well into the final volume, *Paradise*.

On December 11, 1956, she received a most welcome visitor, her old radio producer Val Gielgud, who had come to Witham to interview her for a newspaper article. On Friday, December 13, she traveled to Cambridge, where she joined Barbara Reynolds, her husband, and children for an unusual ceremony. Barbara was to be baptized, and Dorothy stood as her godmother. The next day, Saturday, Norah Lambourne was an overnight guest at Sunnyside. On Sunday, Val Gielgud's interview was published, and it surely must have pleased Dorothy because, instead of focusing on the fate of Lord Peter, as the newspaper hoped, Gielgud reported on her recently published translation of *The Song of Roland*. Two days later, Dorothy went to London to Christmas shop and to see her portrait, painted by Sir William Hutchinson, which was on show in the Royal Society of Portrait Painters exhibition. After canceling another London engagement, she took the train back to Witham and was driven home late. It was the 17th of December. Her body was found by the

cleaner the next morning, at the foot of the stairway. Dorothy had died of a stroke and heart failure. She was sixty-three years old.

Muriel Byrne rushed to her friend's home. She was soon joined there by Anthony Fleming and learned, for the first time, that he was Dorothy's child. Dorothy left her entire estate, valued at around £34,000, to her son and appointed Muriel as her literary executor. Even with his mother gone, Anthony maintained her secret against public disclosure, telling the curious press that he was her "adopted" child.

Dorothy was cremated, and her ashes were placed in the chapel being constructed in the bombed-out tower of St. Anne's Church in Soho, her London parish. The resting place was supposed to be temporary, but in 1978, a commemorative plaque was placed there by the Dorothy L. Sayers Historical and Literary Society. The epitaph reads, "The only Christian work is good work well done."

"When we go to Heaven all I ask is that we shall be given some interesting job and allowed to get on with it."

At the end of her life, the questions remained. Who was this woman? A bold thinker in both fiction and Christian theology or merely a gifted pseudo-intellectual? A genuine original in the field of detective writing or a prosy and snobbish pretender? A loud and aggressive vulgarian or a softer soul who hid her genuine emotions behind a well-crafted facade? A caring mother who did everything in her power to provide for her illegitimate son or a singularly selfish woman who denied her child genuine parental love?

There is some truth in all these characterizations. In the late 1920s, after the birth of her son, Dorothy sat for several portrait studies done by her friend and colleague John Gilroy. In charcoal sketches and oils, Gilroy captured something of her nature—the earthy, deep-bosomed body and peasant-style dress contrasted to the graceful swan's neck and haughty tilt of the chin; the theatrical silver wig, long cigarette holder, and Mona Lisa smile contrasted with the eyes, alert, cast sideways, hinting at some deeper experience. Charcoal was a good medium for Dorothy, a woman and a writer who is best imagined in the shadings of gray.

Like her most famous creation, Lord Peter Wimsey, there was always more to Dorothy than she cared to reveal, and perhaps less than she dared to contemplate. She was not a woman of contrasts so much as of complexities. Convinced of her own intellectual abilities very early in life, she could, without a seeming twinge of conscience, reduce those

she considered less gifted—less bright—to dust. But she was also smart enough to recognize her limitations, fighting off all attempts, for example, to cast her in the role of the Christian evangelist and refusing to proselytize for the faith whose dogmas she so ably defended.

She was a woman of powerful physical appetites and raucous humor, but emotionally handicapped and aloof. She was a gifted excuse-maker, always able to blame someone or something else for her perceived failures. Whether she was capable of any deeply committed love for another is open to debate, but she had an unusual aptitude for friendship, forging relationships that spanned decades. She loved her son, her husband, and her parents as best she could; yet she cut them off, one and all, from the truest part of herself.

But once she had decided where her deepest obligation lay, she gave herself heart and soul to her work—the work of a passionate mind that first showed itself to her readers in *Gaudy Night*. In her religion, she discovered the source of the divine pattern and the connectedness of things that had attracted her since childhood, and through her work—particularly *The Mind of the Maker*, *The Man Born to Be King*, and her monumental translation of Dante—she tried to reveal and invigorate this intellectual pattern for all minds. Her weapons were words, and her great adventures were imaginative and intellectual. (Unlike her contemporary Agatha Christie, Dorothy was not a traveler, apart from holidays to Scotland with her husband and Venice with her friends. She never visited the United States, where her novels were generally more popular than in England.)

She is often cast as a social rebel, but her rebellions were superficial at best. To the end of her life, she dressed to shock and attract attention. She argued loudly, joked bawdily (one of her final projects was a series of comic sketches on secular sainthood, published in the humor magazine *Punch*), ate and drank with gusto, and never backed off from a verbal fight even when she was demonstrably in the wrong—all behaviors that conveyed the image of a “tough broad” in a culture that still worshiped at the pedestal of femininity.

But when it came to genuinely antisocial thoughts and actions, she was utterly conventional and even judgmental. She hated socialism and communism; her political and economic views were conservative, and her belief in individual rights and responsibilities was virtually libertarian. She championed Christian dogma against all attempts to soften and sugarcoat the teachings of the Church.

Even her place in the ranks of detective fiction is hotly debated. Dorothy's supporters maintain that she was the most erudite and novelistic of Golden Age mystery writers and that her hero, Lord Peter Wimsey, is a masterpiece of originality. To her detractors, her erudition is

offensively exhibitionist, her attempt to blend detective and serious fiction was forced and false, and her Lord Peter is no better than the trite confection of a literary social-climber.

Again, simplistic evaluations are not adequate. What seems contrived and snobbish in her fiction was in fact natural to Dorothy. She was well-read; she loved intense disputation and flamboyant literary quotation. (In her last novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, she mocked herself by including the running joke of a quotation contest between Lord Peter and the stolid and often ungrammatical Inspector Kirk.) She did believe that detective fiction could be serious fiction, and she wrote to this objective. (Most readers agree that her worst book is *The Five Red Herrings*, her last attempt to write a pure puzzle mystery.) If she didn't succeed, she set the stage well for writers like Patricia Highsmith, P. D. James, and Ruth Rendell, who have truly linked mystery and literature.

As for Lord Peter, he is what he is. Love him or hate him—readers and critics are rarely neutral—it's hard to ignore his presence. Dorothy was not a snob because she made her detective a wealthy aristocrat; plenty of writers did it before and after her (witness Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn and Margery Allingham's noble *Campion*). Wealth gave him the leisure to detect, and high birth gave him access to the most interesting people and cases. Lord Peter was not the first "humanized" detective; both E. C. Bentley and G. K. Chesterton had humanized the rational model handed down from Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle. But Dorothy made her sleuth not merely love-struck, like Bentley's Philip Trent, or contemplative like Chesterton's Father Brown.

Lord Peter is complicated, like Dorothy herself. He is loquacious and giddy. "A buffoon, that's what I am," he declares in *Strong Poison*. He is also a man of sincere and often-troubled conscience who suffers deep depressions at the end of every case. He is a gay blade, dead attractive to women. He is also a loyal friend, unwilling to exploit a woman to whom he is not attracted or to abuse the vulnerability of the one woman he truly loves. He is intellectually fearless; he avoids physical confrontation. He is vain; he is self-effacing. He is pompous; he is kind. He is well-bred; he is rude. He retains, through eleven books and dozens of short stories, an almost adolescent curiosity and romanticism combined with rock-solid fidelity to his own moral code. Though small in stature, he is always a little larger-than-life. Dorothy gave her Lord Peter many of her own strengths and a substantial measure of her weaknesses. He is, like his creator, a character of many moods and shadings. If we like him, with all his many flaws and foibles, chances are we would also have enjoyed the company of his all-too-human maker.

What Dorothy Sayers contributed to detective fiction—as well as Christian theology of the mid-twentieth century—was a vigor and ro-

bustness that defied refinement. She approached every project, even the lowest work for hire, with integrity and rarely gave less than she was capable of. The emotional commitment she could not give to other people or even to her God, she poured into her work. Like almost everything about her, her faults and failings were large, but that is consistent with a woman who was always willing to live and to think in grand scale.

 BIBLIOGRAPHY

DOROTHY L. SAYERS

1893–1956

English (born: Oxford)

"... in detective stories virtue is always triumphant. They're the purest literature we have." —Lord Peter Wimsey in *Strong Poison*

Dorothy Sayers wrote so extensively that full bibliographies of her original works and translations are lengthy. This chronological listing includes only her major writings and focuses on her detective novels, story collections, plays, and criticism. The first publisher of her first mystery was Boni & Liveright in the United States. Her British publishers to 1930 were Fisher Unwin and Ernest Benn. Her novels were then published by Victor Gollancz. Dates are for first publication. Alternative U.S. titles are given. US = United States. GB = Great Britain. Main characters appear in ().

Mystery Novels and Story Collections

- 1923 *Whose Body?* (Wimsey)
- 1926 *Clouds of Witness* (Wimsey)
- 1927 *Unnatural Death/US: The Dawson Pedigree* (Wimsey)
- 1928 *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (Wimsey)
- 1929 *Lord Peter Views the Body* (collection of Wimsey short stories)
- 1930 *The Documents in the Case*, written with Robert Eustace Barton
- 1930 *Strong Poison* (Wimsey, Harriet Vane)
- 1931 *The Five Red Herrings/US: Suspicious Characters* (Wimsey)
- 1932 *Have His Carcase* (Wimsey, Harriet Vane)
- 1933 *Murder Must Advertise* (Wimsey)
- 1933 *US: Hangman's Holiday* (collection of short stories featuring Wimsey and Montague Egg)
- 1934 *The Nine Tailors* (Wimsey)

- 1935 *Gaudy Night* (Wimsey, Harriet Vane)
 1937 *Busman's Honeymoon* (Wimsey, Harriet Vane)
 1939 *In the Teeth of the Evidence* (short stories with Wimsey, Montague Egg)
 1973 *Striding Folly* (three Wimsey short stories, including the posthumously published "Talboys," published by the New English Library)
 1998 *Thrones, Dominations* (novel fragment featuring Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane; written in 1936; completed by Jill Paton Walsh. GB: Hodder and Stoughton/US: St. Martin's Press)

Selected Essays and Criticism

- 1928 Introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror/US: The Omnibus of Crime*
 1931 Introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror, Second Series/US: The Second Omnibus of Crime*
 1934 Introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror, Third Series/US: The Third Omnibus of Crime*
 1936 Introduction to *Tales of Detection*
 1941 *The Mind of the Maker*
 1944 Introduction to *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins
 1946 *Unpopular Opinions* (collection of essays and speeches)
 1963 *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (collection of twelve essays)
 1977 *Wilkie Collins* (uncompleted literary biography, edited by E. R. Gregory and published by Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries)

Detection Club Collaborations

- 1930 "Behind the Screen" radio serial (part three), BBC
 1931 "The Scoop" radio serial (parts one and twelve), BBC
 1931 *The Floating Admiral* (Introduction, Chapter Six, and Solution)
 1933 "The Conclusions of Roger Sheringham" in *Ask a Policeman*
 1936 "The Murder of Julia Wallace" in *The Anatomy of Murder*
 1939 *Double Death: A Murder Story*

Plays Dates are for first production.

- 1937 *Busman's Honeymoon*, cowritten with Muriel St. Clare Byrne (Lord Peter Wimsey, Harriet Vane)
 1937 *The Zeal of Thy House* (religious festival play for Canterbury Cathedral)
 1939 *The Devil to Pay* (religious festival play for Canterbury Cathedral)
 1939 *He That Should Come* (religious radio play, BBC)