

Women of
MYSTERY

THE LIVES AND WORKS OF NOTABLE
WOMEN CRIME NOVELISTS

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DOROTHY L. SAYERS

THE PASSIONATE MIND

"I dramatised myself, and have at all periods of my life continued to dramatise myself . . . but at all times with a perfect realisation that I was the creator, not the subject, of these fantasies."

—*My Edwardian Childhood*

Dorothy L. Sayers requested that no biography be written of her life until at least fifty years after her passing. A half-century was enough time, she reasoned, to determine if her works were still valued and, by implication, if she would be worth remembering. By the early 1970s—a mere decade and a half after her death—it appeared that her caution had been prophetic: Dorothy L. Sayers seemed doomed to become one of the marginal names in detective fiction. The twelve novels that had made her one of the giants of the British Golden Age were in eclipse, and relatively few (though fiercely loyal) readers were acquainted with her masterful sleuth, the noble Lord Peter Wimsey.



Dorothy L. Sayers

But the fates conspired to save Sayers's name from limbo. Buoyed by the new wave of feminism, women looking for literary role models rediscovered her work and her life. Then, beginning in 1973, a television series produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation and adapted from the Wimsey books introduced a new generation to the charming and capricious Lord Peter and by extension, his creator.

One of the first to tackle Sayers as biographical subject was British

writer Janet Hitchman. In her research for *Such a Strange Lady*, Hitchman performed a feat of detection worthy of Lord Peter himself. Curious about the origins of Dorothy Sayers's "adopted" son, the biographer turned to Somerset House, England's archive of birth and death; there she uncovered a secret to which only a half-dozen or so people had been privy during Dorothy's life—the secret that in many ways shaped the course of her adult life, colored her work, and belied the public image of this most complex woman.

Those who had encountered the public Dorothy L. Sayers at the height of her career remembered a large, mannish, boisterous woman with a prodigious intellect, a love of intense argument, and a loud and often vulgar mouth. The public Dorothy Sayers of the 1930s and 1940s seemed confident to the point of combativeness. Undoubtedly those closest to her sensed the depths of her passions, uncertainties, and fears, though even her dearest friends were denied access to her secrets. But Dorothy deliberately manufactured her fiction out of personal experience, ideas, and beliefs—consciously and unconsciously littering her novels, plays, and even her nonfiction writings with a trail of clues to her life. Thanks to her published work, her private fragments, and most important, her extraordinary gift for letter-writing, we can now become acquainted with the real woman of mystery who was Dorothy L. Sayers.

*"I am a citizen of no mean city."**

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born in a small, seventeenth-century house at 1 Brewer Street in the university city of Oxford on June 13, 1893. She was the one and only offspring of parents somewhat past their prime childbearing years and, consequently, was pampered and indulged from the start.

Her mother, Helen Mary Leigh Sayers—called Nell or Nellie—had come from the town of Shirley, near the southern coastal cities of Bournemouth and Southampton; she was the daughter of a lawyer and niece of the well-known literary humorist Percival Leigh. The Leighs traced their lineage to the reign of Henry III and had a history as landed gentry on the Isle of Wight. Nell was, according to her daughter, "a woman of exceptional intellect, which unfortunately never got the ed-

* This quotation of St. Paul (Acts 21:39) is the opening line of *My Edwardian Childhood*, an unpublished autobiographical fragment written in the 1930s. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from Dorothy L. Sayers's letters and unpublished autobiographical writings. The reference to "no mean city" also appears in *Gaudy Night*, Dorothy's Oxford mystery.

ucation it deserved." A "vivacious and attractive woman," though by no means a beauty, Nell is most frequently described as lively and spirited with a well-developed sense of humor, though she also had a darker side that later manifested itself in frightening episodes of nervous prostration.

Dorothy's father, the Reverend Henry Sayers, was the more strait-laced of the pair: tall, bald, and properly subdued. The son of a minister of Irish descent, Henry had taken his degree in divinity at Magdalen College of Oxford University. Ordained a priest of the Church of England in 1880, Henry took a position as headmaster of a school for boys in Tenbury. Four years later, he returned to Oxford as headmaster of the Christ Church Choir School and chaplain of Christ Church Cathedral. This post neatly combined his musical talents (Henry was an accomplished singer, composer of hymns, and violinist) with his scholarly interests, especially in Latin studies, and he remained at the school for thirteen years.

Henry and Nell were married when he was thirty-nine and she was thirty-six, and Dorothy arrived a year later. With her coming, the Old Choir House in Brewer Street was jammed to its historic rafters with Henry, Nell, and their daughter, Dorothy's maiden aunts Mabel Leigh and Gertrude Sayers, her Grannie Sayers, a nursemaid, and sundry servants. Soon after Dorothy's birth, the whole kit and caboodle moved on to a newer, more spacious Choir House on the same street.

Although she spent only the first few years of her childhood in Oxford, Dorothy retained bright memories of the city of her birth. In her unpublished autobiographical fragment, *My Edwardian Childhood*, she vividly recalled excursions to the Christ Church meadow and games with her nurse among the elm trees of Oxford's Broad Walk; the mechanical false teeth that chattered in the window of a dentist's High Street office; the Choir School's English sheepdog, "Scruggs" (immortalized in *The Five Red Herrings*); the ringing of the Tom Tower clock, which struck 101 times every night at five minutes past nine. Dorothy was inordinately proud of her Oxford birth and her baptism in the Christ Church Cathedral (with her father officiating), and she returned to the great university center many times, both in body and in spirit.

A precocious child, she was blessed with a quick mind. Encouraged by her proud parents, she was totally at ease in the company of adults. She also possessed a quick temper, which would plague her later years. Her earliest memory, she claimed, was of throwing a tantrum that involved screaming at the top of her strong lungs and rolling about on the floor.

As a result of being frequently read to by her parents, she had taught herself to read by age four and was enchanted by the stories of Uncle

Remus and the Brothers Grimm and by Lewis Carroll's Alice tales. This early exposure nurtured a love of the magic of words and language that endured for a lifetime. She had few playmates, with the exception of her cousin Margaret Leigh, so her earliest imaginative adventures involved her favorite toys: two monkey dolls named Jacko and Jocko—the former “puckish, mischievous . . . always in disgrace”; the latter “utterly virtuous and amiable”—and a villainous rag doll named Frenchman.

In 1897, Henry Sayers took the offer of the rectorship at Bluntisham-cum-Earith in East Anglia. Bluntisham and Earith are neighboring villages in a Fen country farming community near Huntingdon (Cambridgeshire). Perhaps because of the isolation of the parish, the Church provided well for its rector; his living included a large house with two acres of gardens at Bluntisham. Dorothy later surmised that her father was tired of teaching and welcomed the change. For her mother, however, the relocation to Bluntisham meant abandoning the social life of Oxford and the close company of friends and relatives.

Little “Dossie” was four and a half when the family moved, and she never forgot the golden winter aconites that lined the rectory's drive when she arrived, accompanied by her nurse and the family's parrot. The new rector brought a large entourage, including his mother, Aunt Mabel (Nell's sister), and the Oxford servants, all of whom had elected to remain with the family. Aunt Gertrude Sayers was also provided for; while not a permanent resident, she enjoyed frequent, extended stays at Bluntisham.

The Victorian manse—repaired and handsomely refurbished by a firm of Oxford decorators hired and directed by Nell—offered a wealth of possibilities for an imaginative child. There were spaces for everyone, including day and night nurseries for Dorothy, two drawing rooms, and her father's study with its American organ. The house lacked electricity and running water, and the servants were forever climbing the backstairs with pails of water for washing and bathing. For Dorothy, the grounds provided lawns and gardens where she could run and play, fruit trees and plantings from which she could gorge on fresh berries, peaches, and plums (saving her from the Leigh family curse of constipation), and a paddock for a pony named Jenny who carted the family from place to place before the acquisition of a Model T Ford. The flat, fertile countryside was wildly beautiful and ominously dangerous. The Fens—thirty square miles of peat marsh that had been drained and diked in the mid-seventeenth century—held the constant threat of flooding, and the man-made system of drainage canals and earthen dams required constant care. Even at the opening of the twentieth century, the farmers and villagers of Bluntisham and Earith were acutely mindful of the disastrous flood of 1713; Dorothy must have heard many accounts of this land-

mark event from which she drew inspiration for the climactic Fen flood in *The Nine Tailors*.

The whole Sayers family tended to the parish. Henry was a conscientious and caring shepherd to his conservative flock, and Nell was particularly attentive to the needs of the poor. But Grannie Sayers, herself a pastor's widow, often took too much interest in the affairs of others and was frequently present where she was not wanted. Though Dorothy was never very fond of her grandmother (or any of her Sayers relatives), she was to paint gentle portraits of dedicated country parsons and their wives in *The Nine Tailors* and also *Busman's Honeymoon*.

Dorothy's childhood was in many ways idyllic. She was educated at home by her parents and a series of governesses. Her day nursery was converted to a schoolroom, and the yearly calendar was divided into proper semesters and vacations. Her father began her Latin studies when she was six, and she was to learn excellent French and passable German from her governesses and au pairs. Dorothy's academic training concentrated on literature, languages, and music, with only passing attention to mathematics and science—a failing that was to cost her dearly when she was sent to boarding school. She had inherited her father's musical talents; he began her violin instruction when she was six or seven, and she also studied piano and singing. From time to time, other children joined her classroom, including Betty Osborne, who became one of Dorothy's few childhood friends, and a young boarder named Guy Cooke, of whom Dorothy, the pampered only child, was viciously jealous. (Even after his death in World War One, she maintained her petulant dislike of him.) Over the years, the Sayerses took in a number of male boarders, youngsters like Guy and older students who were tutored by Henry.

The whole family loved reading aloud, and Dorothy especially enjoyed her grandmother's renderings of the works of Sir Walter Scott and Aunt Mabel's vivid readings of Dickens. Dorothy's taste for literary blood and thunder translated into her role-playing. She was soon writing poetry and creating heroic plays in which she invariably was the hero and family and staff were enlisted as supporting cast members. Her parents stoked this love of drama by providing the costuming and props for her plays and serving as enthusiastic audience. Henry and Nell also took her to London at least once a year to see grown-up productions.

In the rough country environment of Bluntisham, Dorothy grew strong and tall. Through the indulgence of her parents and teachers, she was nurtured on the classics and the robust literature of epic adventure and romance. Her talents—poetry, music, love of learning and disputation—were nourished and encouraged. Perhaps too much encouraged.

"She was self-absorbed, egotistical, timid, priggish, and in a mild sort of way, disobedient." —*Cat o' Mary*

In her late thirties, Dorothy wrote two autobiographical pieces: the memoir *My Edwardian Childhood* and the opening section of a novel titled *Cat o' Mary*. Both works were abandoned, and neither has ever been published. Dorothy's biographers, including James Brabazon, whose 1981 book was "authorized" by Dorothy's son, are generally agreed that these fragments from the 1930s were, in fact, psychological exorcisms. As Brabazon comments, "Dorothy, for some reason, seems to have needed to go back over [her childhood] and lay it bare in some detail. . . ." From the plateau of middle age, Dorothy looked down on the child she had been, and she did *not* like what she saw. When, in the character of Katherine Lammas—the heroine of *Cat o' Mary* and a thinly veiled incarnation of herself—Dorothy examined an only child raised with every whim indulged, learning to manipulate adults at an early age, convinced of her own intellectual superiority, ". . . it was with a hatred of anything so lacking in those common human virtues which were to be attained in after years at so much cost and with such desperate difficulty. . . . Strangers rightly considered her a prig."

Priggish she probably was. Naturally bright and clever, Dorothy was prompted by her elders to show off at every opportunity. In *Cat o' Mary* she told the story of a song that Katherine-Dorothy sang before bed every night. The last line of the ditty ran, "I must love dolly best," but the child learned to substitute for "dolly" the name of a family member, rewarding or punishing the adults as the mood struck her. The grown-ups played into this spiteful little game, waiting each evening to hear which of them had won the child's affection that day.

Dorothy's cousins Margaret Leigh and Gerald and Raymond Sayers occasionally came to stay at the rectory, but in a time of rigid adherence to class divisions, the communities of Bluntisham and Earith offered virtually no middle class from which to draw acceptable playmates for the rector's daughter. Although local children were sometimes included in her schoolroom, except for Betty Osborne, Dorothy had no consistent exposure to her peers until she was well into her teens. She was never forced to compete for attention, and outside of rigidly structured settings such as dancing class, she was rarely exposed to the rough-and-tumble of socialization. Spoiled by adults without the balancing competition with and companionship of other children, Dorothy learned to trust her own knowledge and judgment above those of all others. In modern parlance, she was steeped in self-esteem. In *Cat o' Mary*, she wrote of her alter ego, Katherine Lammas, "She liked correcting other people, but didn't like being corrected herself, and would argue a point with obsti-

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nacy. She had a great opinion of her own cleverness, and to be proved wrong was humiliating."

Dorothy, who always had a low tolerance for children, was perhaps excessively hard in her evaluation of her young self, for she doesn't appear to have been a particularly troublesome child. What discipline she required was "imposed from inside and not outside" as she was expected to learn and follow the moral proscriptions of "duty, self-control, contentment with one's lot, obedience,"* and so forth. But the manner of her upbringing had telling consequences.

As an adult, she complained bitterly about her "cosseted" childhood. Sheltered from real emotional trials, she instinctively turned to literature for her concepts of feelings, weighing her own responses against those in books, and often finding herself wanting. As James Brabazon points out, Dorothy did not confuse reality and fantasy, "but she did expect that the feelings and behaviour of people in books would correspond with those of real people—including herself. She was puzzled that she was unable to experience some of the emotions described so convincingly in books. . . ." So Dorothy's play-making was more than a clever child's fun. It was a means to experience the emotional array that was effectively denied to her by her carefully circumscribed existence and her own generally sanguine temperament.

"What long talks we shall have together in the red fire-light . . . long talks, with nobody to be bored by our conversation. . . ."

—letter to Ivy Shrimpton, November 1908

Dorothy's first real friend was her cousin Ivy Shrimpton. Ivy, the daughter of one of Nell's sisters, was born in California but had moved back to Oxford with her parents. Eight years older than Dorothy, Ivy was gifted with an ability to deal with children and treat them with genuine respect. The friendship between the two girls blossomed during one of Ivy's frequent visits to Bluntisham, when she was sixteen and Dorothy was eight. The cousins shared a love of reading, and Ivy introduced Dorothy to *Little Women* and *Ingoldby's Legends*. Ivy was also ready to discuss ideas and debate seriously and to play active roles in her younger cousin's extravagant fantasies.

When she was thirteen, Dorothy read Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* in French and was so taken with the romantic adventure that

* From a 1948 letter to Barbara Reynolds, quoted in Dr. Reynolds's 1993 biography, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*.

she cast her entire household as characters from the novel. Her father became King Louis XIII, her mother was Cardinal Richelieu, and Aunt Gertrude became Madame de Bois-Tracy. Betty Osborne played Aramis; the French au pair of the moment was Porthos; and the governess, Miss Hamilton, was d'Artagnan. Ivy became the beautiful Duchess of Chevreuse, and Dorothy took the part of the lovesick hero Athos. Even the household and gardening staff were drafted into bit parts when Dorothy staged her re-creation of the swashbuckling novel in the schoolroom of the Bluntisham rectory, rechristened the Château de Bragelonne. She was to play at being Athos for years, and at least until she was seventeen, she continued to address family members by their fictional names and titles.

She wrote frequent, chatty letters to Ivy—addressed from “Bragelonne”—recounting family gossip and activities, discussing books and music, and revealing details of various crushes. One object of her affections was a dark-eyed visitor who was code-named “Dull Red” by the girls for his color choice when playing croquet. At Christmas in 1908, Dorothy’s parents took her to see a London production of *Henry V*, and Dorothy immediately wrote to Ivy (already expressing herself in the exuberant style that will be familiar to readers of the Wimsey mysteries), “. . . I have fallen madly, hopelessly, desperately in love. . . .” The object of this outpouring was a popular, middle-aged actor named Lewis Waller, and if Dorothy’s confession of love was histrionic, her grip on reality was secure: “Unfortunately I fear that my passion is totally unrequited.”

It was around this time that Dorothy experienced a kind of intellectual revelation that ignited her: she discovered that Ahasuerus, about whom she read in the Bible, was also Xerxes, whom she had studied in history. People, things, ideas suddenly connected, “like fitting together two pieces of a puzzle and hearing all the other pieces fall into place one after the other, locking and clicking.” Using geometry, she located an overgrown tennis court in the garden. Again she made the connection: “. . . the lovely satisfying unity of things—the wedding of the thing learnt and the thing done—the great intellectual fulfillment.” The quick child had, on her own, grasped the concept that centuries of good teachers have tried to pound into young minds, that learning is not an isolated endeavor and that “lessons . . . were part of everything else.” Whatever befell her, she knew that it was somehow part of a greater pattern.

*"She would be either the school star or the school butt.
Which? She had not imagined that it was perfectly
possible to be both."
—Cat o' Mary*

In June 1908, when she had just turned fifteen, Dorothy donned the mask of Athos to announce that she was to be sent to boarding school. "I am leaving the Court," she wrote to Ivy. "Out and alas! for our noble company. The grand bond will be broken forever after Christmas! for ever and ever. And now, no more shall the Four Musketeers walk side by side in the garden, or fight together for the King."

Her parents had determined that she was destined for university education, and they may also have finally realized how much she needed the company of peers. The decision to send her to boarding school may have been difficult, but given the poverty of advanced education in their area, Henry and Nell had no real choice. They settled on the Godolphin School, to the south in Salisbury, where Dorothy would join some two hundred other girls under the tutelage of Miss Alice Mary Douglas, her sister Lucy, and their staff of teachers. For some reason, Dorothy was to enter at midyear, so on January 17, 1909, she arrived at Godolphin for her first extended stay away from home and family and her first experience of competitive academics among girls of her own station.

Her biographers disagree about her reactions to boarding school. Her first days could not have been comfortable; Miss Douglas had mistakenly classified Dorothy as an eight-year-old entering student. Then, because of her poor mathematics skills, she was placed in the lower fifth form, behind most girls of her age. Certainly she was well-read and accomplished in languages, surprising her French mistress with her knowledge of Molière and her command of subjunctive forms. But she was an odd and gawky girl, "a fish out of water" in the company of social equals, physically awkward, argumentative, and bossy. She was not especially popular with her schoolmates;* nor, to her astonishment, with her teachers. Early on, the Godolphin staff judged her to be gifted but superficial and unable to accept criticism. At the beginning of her second term, Dorothy wrote her parents that "Fanny M. [Florence Mildred White, the French teacher for whom Dorothy had great respect] read me a little lecture on Friday, saying that I'd had wonderful advantages, and must not be too exalted!"

* Mystery writer Josephine Bell was almost thirteen when she was sent to board at Godolphin and met Dorothy, then eighteen. She remembered Dorothy as not pretty but "strikingly different." Bell recalled that Dorothy was lively and excessively talkative, but she "made little stir in the school." ("A Face-to-Face Encounter with Sayers" by Josephine Bell. In *Murderess Ink*, edited by Dilys Winn. 1979.)

Going strictly by Dorothy's letters home—letters that effervesce with excitement about activities and gossip about pupils and teachers—she would seem to have adjusted well to Godolphin. But her later comments and occasional off-key remarks in her letters paint another picture.

Dorothy certainly threw herself into activities at the school. She continued her violin and piano lessons and played first violin in the school orchestra. She attended and participated in theatricals, at one point considering a stage career for herself, though her teachers opined that she was better suited to be a dramatist than an actor. She excelled in the subjects she liked and continued to slough off those that bored her, notably history and mathematics. (She once wrote home in fury about a teacher who had accused her of "[spending] more time than I ought over my French and [slacking] over all my other work. . . .") She participated in organized debates with faculty members (" . . . you can argufy with your revered form mistress till all's blue if you like, and pour out your sarcasm . . . with crushing force.")

She found a few friends, particularly Violet Christy, who shared her interests in playacting and literature, and Molly Edmondson, a girl whom Dorothy described as being, like herself, "considered a 'weird freak' by the conventional portion of this establishment." She continued to nourish her "pash" for the unattainable actor Lewis Waller. She developed other crushes, one on the handsome Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton, whose lecture at Godolphin inspired Dorothy to write a sonnet in his honor. On more solid ground, she practiced her flirting on her cousin Raymond Sayers, who treated her to an evening in London on her sixteenth birthday. She also experienced the inevitable, chaste, girls' school crush on her favorite teacher, Miss White.

In 1910, Henry and Nell determined that their daughter should be confirmed with other Godolphin girls in a mass ceremony at Salisbury Cathedral. To a letter describing the ceremony to her parents—the setting, her dress and white veil, her first communion, the sermon—she added a poignant postscript: "I never can write about my *feelings*—that's why I haven't." But years later, she recalled, "Being baptized without one's will is certainly not so harmful as being confirmed against one's will, which is what happened to me and gave me a resentment against religion in general which lasted a long time. . . ." What Dorothy resented was the lack of an intellectual underpinning to this great rite of passage in her church; she wanted religion to be an adventure of the mind, not a set of time-encrusted rituals. She must also have felt keenly the absence of her parents, who stayed at home for the dedication of a new set of church bells.

In her schoolgirl letters to her parents and to Ivy, Dorothy proved herself to be a capable dissembler. Her unhappiness was buried like tiny

nuggets in these letters—the “weird freak” comment, for instance. Another time she lamented, “One gets sick of school sometimes and being ‘Dorothy’ to everyone, and blown up by everybody, from Miss Douglas to one’s Games Representative.” At the opening of her spring 1911 semester, she reported, “The people who usually scowl at me or ignore me received me with open arms and wreathed smiles . . .,” possibly because everyone loves a winner and Dorothy had just come first in the nation in the Cambridge Higher Local Examinations, with distinctions in French and spoken German.

That semester she nearly died when a measles epidemic swept the school and she developed double pneumonia accompanied by dangerously high fever and delirium. The crisis passed, but her recovery was slow—first in a nursing home near Salisbury, then back at the rectory in Bluntisham—and James Brabazon speculates that it was during her convalescence that Dorothy finally confided her misery to her parents. She also experienced a humiliation that would have prostrated weaker women: her hair fell out as the result of her illness. Her thin, lank, straight hair was never her crowning glory, but to lose it—just when she was about to turn eighteen—was surely devastating. It is a mark of her strength in genuine crisis (seen again and again in her life) that she returned to Godolphin in the fall of 1911, sporting a wig and her usual jolly facade.

In her last letter from Godolphin, she mentions a “scarlet-fever scare” at the school, which possibly prompted her parents to keep her at home the following semester. Some have suggested that she suffered a nervous breakdown, but that seems unlikely in view of her continued academic performance during this hiatus. Tutored by mail, she prepared for the Gilchrist Scholarship competition to Somerville College, one of the two women’s colleges at Oxford University. She won her scholarship, and by the summer of 1912 she was happily assembling a new wardrobe for her first term.

There’s little doubt that, for all her academic success, Godolphin had been a painful experience and one that shaped her responses to other people and other difficulties. She learned, like Athos, to mask her unwavering conviction of intellectual superiority behind a jovial, boisterous, and often buffoonish facade. She learned to reveal and make fun of her own enthusiasms before anyone else had the chance, to play the clown who was the butt of her own jokes. She learned to keep her secrets close and let the rest of the world be damned.

In *The Nine Tailors*, written in 1933, Dorothy included a character strongly reminiscent of her own adolescent self—Hilary Thorpe, a precocious fifteen-year-old who gains the attention of Lord Peter Wimsey. Discovering Hilary’s ambition to be a writer, Wimsey explains that she

has "the creative imagination, which works outwards, till finally you will be able to stand outside your own experience and see it as something you have made, existing independently of yourself. You're lucky. . . . but your luck will come more at the end of life than at the beginning, because the other sort of people won't understand the way your mind works. They will start by thinking you dreamy and romantic, and then they'll be surprised to discover that you are really hard and heartless. They'll be quite wrong both times—but they won't ever know it, and *you* won't know it at first, and it'll worry you."

It did worry Dorothy. At Godolphin, she discovered that not only was she unlike other girls of her class; she was not especially liked by them. She was smarter than most, but certainly not all, of her schoolmates, but neither teachers nor students appreciated her self-possessed assertiveness. In two years at Godolphin, she cemented her ability to compartmentalize her life—crafting a public self that accounted well enough for her brash and often boorish behavior; maintaining her intellectual integrity; hiding her fear and secrets from all but herself; and learning, in Wimsey's words, "to stand outside [her] own experience."

*"Dear old Oxford! . . . I wonder why I love it so—I
always feel when I go there as if I were going
home. . . ."*

Dorothy entered Somerville College in the fall of 1912, going joyfully back to Oxford, the place of her birth. There were relatives and family friends who took a not-always-welcome interest in her welfare. There were famous thinkers and dedicated scholars to fire her mind, as well as young men who enjoyed flirtation as much as she. And as she quickly discovered inside the walls of Somerville, there were young women like herself: bright, intellectual, creative, curious, and odd in their own ways.

Her experience at Godolphin seems not to have diminished Dorothy's instinctive sociability, and she threw herself into university life with her usual enthusiasm. One of the first things she did was to audition for the Oxford Bach Choir. A strong contralto, she had been taking singing lessons at home in Bluntisham, and membership in the choir provided a deeply satisfying aesthetic outlet for her. It also brought her into close contact with Dr. Hugh Percy Allen, organist at Christ Church and conductor of the Bach Choir. Now she could expend her passion, not on a distant actor or adventurer, but on a living, breathing, and receptive presence. Dr. Allen (later to be Oxford Professor of Music and Director of the Royal College of Music) was the perfect object for one of Dorothy's exuberant crushes. Fortyish and married, he apparently made

flirtation with female students something of an avocation; as Dorothy wrote with stunning openness to her parents, she was but one of "a long procession of little tame cats who have adorned his organ loft in succession. . . ." In Dorothy's case, the trips into the organ loft seem to have been harmless enough—a testing, perhaps, of her ability to vamp an older and more sophisticated man.

Dorothy had no illusions about her physical appeal. She was tall and thin with lovely arms and hands, and a long neck that had earned her the nickname "Swanny" at Godolphin. She had her father's clear blue eyes, smallish and often hidden behind spectacles for reading, and her mother's turned-up nose, narrow mouth accented with dimples, and long upper lip. She often wore her sparse dark hair with an old-maidish middle part (her Mona Lisa pose). Hardly the kind of looks to launch a thousand ships, but a face with "character," as she described Katherine Lammas in *Cat o'Mary*: "It could not help being an interesting face—could it?—when it belonged to such an interesting person." In fact, in the rare photographs that picture her smiling open-mouthed, Dorothy has an almost gamine attractiveness.

Shrewdly she chose to dress for dramatic effect, and she loved striking outfits: bold colors, dashing cloaks and hats, scooped necklines and shallow sleeves that displayed her shoulders and arms, exotic dangling earrings to accentuate her graceful neck. Though hardly extreme, her Bohemian style at Somerville echoed her childhood love of swashbuckling costuming.

Dr. Allen continued to fascinate even after she left Somerville, but he was not the only object of her attentions. She flirted with her German teacher and had a relationship that bordered on serious with Giles Dixey, an Oxford student and the son of family friends. She enjoyed the company of another Bach Choir member, Arthur Forrest, and when he was killed in World War One, she wrote a poem in his honor for publication in a university magazine. But far more important than these flutterings after the men of Oxford were the friendships she established with a group of gifted Somerville women—the girls of the Mutual Admiration Society.

At Godolphin, Dorothy had been the bumptious pariah, but at Somerville, she found her place. Actually, she made her first friend, Dorothy Rowe, when both were at Somerville to take the scholarship exam. As the two girls sat together in a waiting room, Dorothy Sayers ostentatiously began to recite a passage from *Cyrano de Bergerac* in French, and Dorothy Rowe quickly took up the quote. It was the beginning of the kind of friendship Dorothy Sayers had longed for.

Just a month into her first term at Somerville, Dorothy and another first-year student named Amphy Middlemore started an informal

group—the Mutual Admiration Society, or M.A.S.—for a small group of girls who shared their interests in writing and creative scholarship. The girls supported and encouraged one another's efforts and provided what Dorothy craved, the companionship of like minds. Other M.A.S. members were Muriel Jaeger, called "Jim" (to whom Dorothy was to dedicate her first novel, *Whose Body?*); Catherine Godfrey, known as "Tony"; Charis Barnett; and Dorothy Rowe. Muriel St. Clare Byrne, two years younger than the original M.A.S. six, submitted the requisite example of original writing and was admitted into the chosen circle in 1914. The friendships forged among these girls were to be both lasting and productive.

In the cloistered world of a women's college, Dorothy had found friends who enjoyed her outgoing nature and shared her love of literature, music, poetry, and the power of words and ideas—young women who could debate the relative merits of G. K. Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw (both of whom had spoken at Oxford) in one breath and the latest fashions in the next. Despite her emotional reserve, with the M.A.S. girls Dorothy could share her ideas, her interests, even her anxieties about the future, and expect to be taken seriously.

She could freely indulge her intellectual fascination with classical and medieval languages in tutorials with Miss Mildred Pope, who would later become the model for the charmingly diffuse character of Miss Lydgate in *Gaudy Night*. As at Godolphin, some of the faculty at Somerville initially complained that Dorothy sloughed off what did not interest her, and in one report, a professor noted that she was "still lacking in self restraint."* Dorothy herself recalled doing little actual academic work, but the work somehow got done, and she completed her baccalaureate program with First Class honors in medieval French in 1915. (For reasons of history rather than individual performance, Dorothy was not to receive her diploma until 1920, when Oxford at last chose to legitimate degrees for women, some forty-one years after the founding of Somerville.)

World War One began in August 1914, when Dorothy was on holiday in France with a school friend and a chaperon. The three women returned home safely, but even this firsthand experience of the war had little impact on Dorothy. Returning to Oxford in the fall, she initially involved herself as a volunteer helping to find housing for the influx of Belgian refugees, but she seems not to have felt the war's effects in any deeper sense. Though she must have worried about the young Oxford men fighting and often dying at the Front, her prayers were reserved for

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

Oxford itself, that the ancient city that had so captured her heart would be saved from the German bombs.

Her father offered to pay for a year of postgraduate study at Somerville, but Dorothy refused. She was concerned about the additional financial burden on her parents, but it seems likely that she was also tired of the academic rigor. She had long since determined to become a professional poet, and she probably felt the time had come to get on with it. Nevertheless, it wasn't easy to separate from her beloved Oxford and her coterie of friends.

The summer she "went down" (completed her studies), she returned to Bluntisham and toyed with the idea of becoming a Red Cross nurse in France. Nothing came of that plan, but she continued working at her poetry. A lay, comprising twelve poems celebrating Oxford and mostly composed while she was in college, was published in December of 1915, and a year later, her first solo volume, *Op. I*, was put out in an edition of 350 copies. *Op. I* was part of the *Adventurers All* series, the brainchild of Oxford publisher Basil Blackwell, who envisioned the books as launching pads for young poets. (Blackwell succeeded too well and eventually had to abandon the series when many of his young finds, including Aldous Huxley and the Sitwell brothers, moved on to more lucrative publishing contracts.) Other poems were accepted by other publications, but if Dorothy was to live somewhere other than her parents' home, she had to find a more profitable occupation. After some foot-dragging, she finally got on with the business of hunting for a job and secured a teaching position at a girls' high school in Hull, a port city in England's industrial north.

Apart from the ever-present grime of industry, Hull was better than Dorothy had expected, with cinemas and several nice shops and eating places. Dorothy enjoyed the company of her fellow teachers and sharpened her flirting skills on a local curate. She proved to be an energetic and inspiring teacher who not only taught her girls French but also organized a school choir and reluctantly took on a German class. But she learned in Hull that she did not enjoy teaching. In Hull she also discovered the reality of warfare as she had never imagined it in sacrosanct Oxford.

When the Germans began their zeppelin raids on England, Hull's port was a prime target, and Dorothy frequently found herself huddled in damp cellars as the bombs dropped. Here, her intellect was helpless, and her joking and high spirits were pointless. All around she saw genuine physical fear—"brutal, bestial and utterly degrading"—and she didn't like it. For a twenty-two-year-old girl with little more experience of the primal emotions than could be gleaned from novels and poetry, war was hell. Though she attributed cringing fear to others, she was far

from immune, and once again she began to lose her hair. (Dorothy was admittedly a physical coward, notoriously so in later years, preferring battles that could be waged with mind and mouth.)

She taught at Hull for two terms, until her father intervened. Henry Sayers had been offered a new position as rector of Christchurch on the Isle of Ely (Cambridgeshire). The parish was even more isolated than Bluntisham-cum-Earith, but the annual stipend was larger, so Henry and Nell prepared to move. The extra money also allowed Henry to approach Basil Blackwell with an offer: if Blackwell would take Dorothy on as a publisher's apprentice, Henry would pay £100 for her support. Blackwell, who met Dorothy for the first time in February 1917, agreed, and Dorothy must have been ecstatic; the new job rescued her from teaching and from Hull and brought her back to Oxford.

By May, she was settled into rooms at 17 Long Wall Street and busily learning the publishing trade. Her M.A.S. buddies Muriel "Jim" Jaeger and Muriel St. Clare Byrne were still at Somerville, and others of the old society were in and out of Oxford. There were new friends, including Doreen Wallace, who remembered Dorothy in those days: "long and slim . . . small head alert on slender neck, she loped round Oxford looking for fun."*

Dorothy was in her twenties and full of juice. Her letters show a kind of giddiness that is charming in its way but clearly wore thin on some of her acquaintances. Her emotional remoteness could be infuriating, and her insensitivity shocking. When the 1918 pandemic outbreak of Spanish influenza (which claimed more lives than the war before it ran its deadly course) swept Oxford, Dorothy caught a mild case and quickly recovered. Her chief complaint, expressed in a letter to her mother, was that she had been forced to cancel her Halloween soiree: ". . . one can't give hilarious parties with people dropping dead all round one!" Apparently, her primary interest in the killer flu was its resemblance to the medieval Black Plague.

Though some of her biographers tend to skirt this issue, she was also, in the language of the times, man-crazy. However emotionally blocked she may have been, Dorothy was a physically passionate woman, strongly curious about, yet frightened by, sex. Flirting and crushes on unattainables such as Hugh Allen brought her close to the dangerous edge, but when she received her first marriage proposal, from Leonard Hodgson, "a perfectly delightful padre" and Vice-Principal of St. Edmund Hall, she bolted like a frightened rabbit. When Hodgson contin-

* Doreen Wallace later became a novelist. She is quoted by Barbara Reynolds in *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*.

ued to pursue her, even joining the Bach Choir though he was not much of a singer, Dorothy was appalled. She wrote home, "To have someone devoted to me arouses all my worst feelings. I loathe being deferred to. I ABOMINATE being waited on. It infuriates me to feel that my words are numbered and my actions watched. I want somebody to fight with!" The unfortunately besotted Hodgson, who went on to have a distinguished career as a theologian, was too much the compliant lap-dog. He also represented actual sexual as well as emotional commitment, and Dorothy was worried that she might be afraid of the physical side of marriage. With Hodgson firmly denied, she continued to enjoy her flirtations, one with the surgeon who removed her appendix in the summer of 1917.

Somehow, betwixt work and friends and countless activities, she continued to write seriously, and her second volume of poems, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, was published by Basil Blackwell in the fall of 1918. To promote interest in her work, which was much influenced by both the style and theological ideas of G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy and a friend connived at a publicity scheme that they called "the Maynard controversy." When well-known Catholic poet Theodore Maynard reviewed *Catholic Tales* unfavorably in Chesterton's magazine, *The New Witness*, "Jim" Jaeger began a spirited correspondence, writing under various pseudonyms to the magazine. Other, genuine writers soon joined the fray, and the verbal sparring continued for several months, until Dorothy tired of it.

Her mind was on other things. Tossed out of her flat because the landlady preferred renting to young men, Dorothy moved into an apartment in a house on Bath Place, where she planned to launch a Thursday night "salon" in her sitting room. There were musical evenings and gatherings of the Rhyme Club (Dorothy, Doreen Wallace, and Eleanor Geitch) attended at least once by the poetic Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell and Siegfried Sassoon.

In May 1918, Dorothy left Blackwell's (Basil Blackwell was converting from poetry to textbook publication and possibly let her go), and was supporting herself with freelance editing, some journalism, and tutoring. Money was tight, but Dorothy had no intention of moving on, not when Captain Eric Whelpton lived in the same house. Tall and handsome, Whelpton had been invalided out of the Army after contracting polio, which left him weak and subject to fainting attacks. He returned to his studies at Oxford and was soon a frequent presence at Dorothy's gatherings. Though Doreen Wallace had spotted him first, Dorothy quickly moved in. Part smitten schoolgirl, part teacher, and part mother, she devoted herself to his needs.

In fact, Whelpton had a romantic interest elsewhere, but he enjoyed

Dorothy's company, and they had a good deal in common, especially French language and literature. Raised in France, he was a sophisticate in her eyes, though, he readily admitted, her intellectual inferior. When he moved to France to take a teaching job at a private boys' school in 1919, Dorothy boldly wrote him to ask about a possible position there. It turned out that Whelpton needed an assistant. In addition to teaching English at L'Ecole des Roches at Verneuil in Normandy, he was establishing an exchange program for British and French students. He needed help, someone fluent in French and English, and he offered the post to Dorothy. Whelpton even agreed to present himself for inspection by Dorothy's parents and enjoyed a pleasant visit at the Christchurch rectory.

So Dorothy, her bicycle in tow, arrived in Verneuil by train to begin working for the man she had nicknamed "Snark." She was efficiency itself, tending to the exchange bureau's office affairs and occasionally shepherding groups of young scholars to and from England. She was also on hand to nurse Whelpton through his attacks, teaching his classes when he was ill and pampering him at all times.

She involved herself in school activities and enjoyed the company of the teachers and staff—excepting an Englishman named Charles Crichton, an Eton graduate and ex-cavalry officer who had lost his money during the war. Though down on his luck, Crichton could still tell spirited tales of the good old days when he maintained a bachelor flat in Jermyn Street (one street away from Peter Wimsey's fictional flat on Piccadilly), frequented his London clubs, partied lavishly in town and country, and was served by an eccentric valet named Bates who became his military batman. Though Dorothy and Crichton shared a mutual dislike, biographer Barbara Reynolds makes a good case that Crichton's stories supplied the details of life in the upper reaches of British society that later surfaced in Lord Peter Wimsey, and that Wimsey's man Bunter was modeled on Bates the batman. Eric Whelpton later contended, probably correctly, that Lord Peter's distinctive characteristics were an amalgam of his own and Crichton's.

Dorothy had detection on her mind in Verneuil. She was reading detective stories. With several of her friends back in Oxford (including G. D. H. Cole and his wife, Margaret, who were to become a successful mystery-writing team), Dorothy had discussed a plan to form a writing syndicate that would produce profitable detective books. The idea was obviously based on the extremely popular Sexton Blake series—formula mysteries cranked out by dozens of writers and published in magazines and as penny-dreadful novels. When she contracted mumps, which required three weeks' isolation, Dorothy requested that "Jim" Jaeger send as many Sexton Blake books as she could discreetly mail. Dorothy and

"Jim" then entered into one of their intellectual games, creating a satirical analysis of Sexton Blake that connected the hack detective to ancient myths and legends. This Sexton Blake escapade may have helped her turn her mind away from her failure with Eric Whelpton.

Oddly for a man of the world, Whelpton hadn't grasped the true nature of Dorothy's feelings for him until well into their tenure at Verneuil. Then they were caught up in the affairs of a young staff member named Adele. The unmarried Adele found herself pregnant and abandoned. When Dorothy discovered that the girl planned to have an abortion, she jumped into the situation, pulling Whelpton with her. Dorothy first convinced the girl that abortion would be an irredeemable sin. She and Eric then arranged for Adele to go to Paris, and he used his family connections to secure employment and shelter for the mother-to-be. Hard as it is to imagine today, the situation was extremely difficult and emotional, demanding both delicacy and secrecy. As Dorothy and Eric worked closely to rescue Adele, he finally realized that his flirtatious assistant was in love with him.

Eric was already in love with someone else, a married woman whom he had met during a recent visit to London. When he told Dorothy, she was torn with jealousy, and the atmosphere in their small office became tense and uncomfortable for both. But Whelpton was already job-hunting and also thinking about a move to Italy, and he was anxious to leave the school as soon as possible. He offered to sell Dorothy his interest in the student exchange venture so she could stay on in France.

Dorothy must have been distraught. She admitted to occasional "black times," and after her bout of mumps, she suffered another round of hair loss. She seriously considered buying the business but finally decided against it. She would fulfill her responsibilities in France, taking over Whelpton's teaching duties and the running of the bureau when he left. She wrote her parents the happy news of the birth of Adele's baby boy in June 1920, and by the end of September, she was ready to return home. But this time it was London, not Oxford, that called her.

There was, however, one stop in Oxford that she could not miss. On October 14, 1920, the great university at last formalized the education of its women by granting them degrees. It was an historic occasion, and Dorothy wouldn't have missed it for the world. Twice within a matter of minutes, she passed through the ceremonial line, first to receive her bachelor's degree and then her master of arts. The immediate problem was that her grand new degrees did very little to help her find a job. She might have returned to Somerville as a postgraduate student, but that would have required her parents to pay her fees, and besides, she always said she never wanted an academic career. She definitely didn't want to teach. When an offer came along to write a screenplay for a movie pro-

ducer she had once met in London, she jumped at it. The screenplay, on which she collaborated with Dorothy Rowe, was accepted by the producer but apparently never paid for. This was the last time Dorothy was to be conned by a glittering financial promise. But her short-lived vision of a career in the cinema had at least provided the incentive she needed to pack up and head for London.

Relying on a monthly allowance from her father and what little else she could scrape together, she took an unfurnished room at 36 St. George's Square in Pimlico (where she would later house Peter Wimsey's spinster investigator, Miss Climpson). Reverend Sayers also found work for her, translating French documents for a Polish employer. She applied, unsuccessfully, for a series of full-time jobs and was eventually forced to take a temporary post teaching English. Students at Clapham High School were astonished by her teaching methods and her intense personality. No longer the bright, bustling mistress she had been at Hull, she nevertheless made a lasting impression on her Clapham pupils.

She had moved to a new room at 44 Mecklenburg Square (later to become Harriet Vane's address in *Gaudy Night*), and since the rent did not include board, Dorothy was teaching herself to cook. In the Bohemian circles of Bloomsbury, she enjoyed the company of a number of young men who would sometimes treat her to a good meal. Her most frequent escort was Norman Davey, a writer who encouraged Dorothy's ambitions. Davey's first novel, *The Pilgrim of a Smile*, was published in 1921. (Dorothy admired the book, which included a character named Major Bunter.)

She continued her translation work, took on more substitute teaching, and on Saturdays hied herself off to the Reading Room of the British Museum, where she had embarked on a study of criminology. In January 1921, she informed her mother of her latest activity: "My detective story begins brightly, with a fat lady found dead in her bath with nothing on but her pince-nez."

That fat lady never got to sing, but readers of Dorothy's first novel, *Whose Body?*, will easily recognize the fundamentals of its plot. The idea of the body in the bathtub had originated during an evening of intellectual party games played several years before in Oxford. She worked at the book throughout the spring, pushed on by Muriel Jaeger, and finished it during a visit with her parents at Christchurch in the summer of 1921. Lord Peter Wimsey had been born, though it would be three more years before he was presented to the world at large. Dorothy struggled to create her fictional detective and his first case, but he was no trouble at all when compared to the real man in her life. She was in love again, and the object of her passion was no noble gentleman.

"If I could have found a man to my measure, I could have put a torch to the world."

—letter to John Cournos, October 1924

When Dorothy was preparing for her summer visit home, she wrote to her parents that she would like to bring a friend along. He didn't make the trip after all, but Dorothy told her family about him and even induced them to read one of his books.

His name was John Cournos, born Johann Gregorievitch Korshoon in Kiev, Russia, in 1881. His parents had divorced, and when John was five, his mother married a man named Cournos, a member of the strict Jewish Hasid sect. Faced with the turbulent anti-Semitism of czarist Russia, they immigrated to the United States when John was ten, and settled in Philadelphia. The family was poor, and at age twelve, Cournos quit school to work in a factory. Two years later, he approached the publisher of the *Philadelphia Record* and so impressed the man that he was immediately hired as an office boy. Cournos had risen through the newspaper's ranks in classic journalistic tradition before he decided, in 1912, to move to England and freelance his writing. He proved to be an adept interviewer, tackling the likes of G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, D. H. Lawrence, and poets John Masefield and William Butler Yeats. When the war came, Cournos went to work as a translator for the Russians, and in 1917 he joined a group of foreign correspondents on a mission to Petrograd. Returning to London, he worked for the British Foreign Office and the Ministry of Information.

He was, Dorothy said, the kind of man who "spells Art with a capital A." His art was Imagist poetry and dense fiction. His first novel, the one read by Reverend and Mrs. Sayers, was *The Mask*. Published in 1919, the book was well received in literary circles and picked up a major writing prize. When Dorothy met Cournos, he was one of the loftier members of the Bloomsbury crowd that so attracted her romantic soul. He was working on his second novel and a volume of poetry. She was struggling to support herself, hammering out her second "Lord Peter" novel and trying to sell the first, and facing the not-too-distant prospect of turning thirty still unwed and a virgin. She fell like a bag of bricks for the dark Jewish intellectual with the distinctive Slavic handsomeness and Russian-tinted voice.

Their affair—reconstructed from a set of Dorothy's letters that Cournos gave to Harvard University and from the later public writings of both—was passionate, volatile, and all but consummated. As she had done with Eric Whelpton, Dorothy turned earth mother, pampering Cournos's physical and emotional needs, nursing his inflated ego, en-

during his moods and constant demeaning of her own literary ambitions, dreaming of wedding her hero and bearing his children, preferably peasant style in a field. When his second book, *The Wall*, failed to do well, she was sympathetic. She lent him her flat when she was away from London. When she at last landed a permanent job as a copywriter with the S. H. Benson advertising and publicity agency and then sold her "Lord Peter," she celebrated her success by preparing a sumptuous meal for Cournos. She also mentioned him frequently in her letters home.

Cournos's one generosity to her seems to have been an introduction to literary agent Andrew Dakers. Dakers took on her first novel, and by July of 1922 he had placed it with an American publisher, Boni and Live-right, which had also published a book of Cournos's poems. The Americans gave Dorothy's novel its title, *Whose Body?*

Then on September 18, 1922, Dorothy wrote to her parents that Cournos was returning to the United States. Though they had quarreled, she clearly expected to hear from him again, but by November, there had been not so much as a postcard. She had no idea that Cournos would soon marry someone else.

When all the excuses and rationalizations are cleared away, the catalyst that doomed the relationship was sex. Cournos, predictably, was dedicated to the new religion of free love. He did not believe in marriage; he did not want children. Dorothy was a peasant at heart, but a rector's daughter in her soul. She wanted sex that led naturally to marriage and children. She and Cournos disagreed mightily about contraception: he believed in it and she didn't. She refused to accept sexual intercourse that came with the "taint of the 'rubber-shop,'" and though they apparently did everything but, they did not have intercourse.

When Dorothy fictionalized Cournos as Philip Boyes in her 1930 novel *Strong Poison*, she presented a man who used sex as a test of a woman's willingness to submit to his control. Philip Boyes, the character whose death lands Harriet Vane in the Old Bailey on trial for her life, is described by the trial judge as an author of "literary works . . . of what is sometimes called an 'advanced' type. They preached doctrines which may seem to some of us immoral or seditious, such as atheism, and anarchy, and what is known as free love. His private life appears to have been conducted, for some time at least, in accordance with these doctrines." It is in that little aside—"for some time at least"—that Dorothy demonstrates Boyes-Cournos's ultimate betrayal.

Cournos's sin was not that he believed in "advanced" ideas; Dorothy was relatively advanced herself and certainly more than ready for premarital sex. Cournos failed her (as Philip Boyes fails Harriet Vane) by *not*

believing in the ideas he professed. He wanted Dorothy to submit to sex without consequences to himself. When she wouldn't, he left, and within two years, he had married a twice-divorced American detective story writer, Helen Kestner Satterthwaite (pen name, Sybil Norton). Later he confessed to Dorothy that he would have willingly married her and settled down if she had submitted to him first.

Despite her acidic portrait of Cournos as Boyes in *Strong Poison*, Dorothy did not fictionalize intimate details of the affair. Cournos did, in his 1932 novel *The Devil Is an English Gentleman*, even lifting bits of dialog from Dorothy's letters to him. A cad to the end.

Emotionally battered and sexually frustrated when Cournos left, Dorothy did the obvious thing. She found an agreeable man and rebounded. Bill White was as unlike Cournos as day to night. Though well educated, he was a sometime car salesman, a mechanic, and a motorcycle enthusiast without a trace of literary pretension. A man's man, he provided Dorothy the natural, healthy masculine sexuality so lacking in John Cournos. They were not in love, but they had wonderful times together, and she took Bill to Christchurch for Christmas in 1922, arriving on his motorcycle. She had written to her mother that "he's the last person you'd expect me to bring home, but he's really quite amiable, and will be desperately grateful for a roof over his head."

Dorothy was doing very well at her job with Benson's; her boss told her that she had "every quality which makes for success in advertising. . . ." *Whose Body?* had been sold in England to Fisher Unwin, and *People's Magazine* had bought the American serial rights. She was still working on her second "Lord Peter" (as she referred to her Wimsey novels) and beginning to sample the financial fruits of her own labor.

With Bill White, Dorothy could let her hair down and get her hands dirty. He taught her about motorcycle mechanics and helped her with improvements to her apartment. They went to pubs and movies and dance halls; he told her dirty jokes, which she loved, and they made up obscene limericks together. It was a comfortable, no-demands relationship, and at some point Dorothy finally lost her virginity, ironically agreeing to use contraception. In fact, this interlude with Bill White might have been the perfect transition for her—except that, just two months before her thirtieth birthday, the contraceptives failed and Dorothy became pregnant. What she did next may be regarded as an act of supreme self-sacrifice or as sheer pigheaded stupidity, but for a woman of her genteel parentage and Victorian upbringing, it was nothing short of remarkable.

*"To carry it through one needs two things: a) guts,
b) iron health."*

By June 1923, Dorothy knew she was in a fix. She consulted a friend from Oxford, Dr. Alice Chance, who confirmed the pregnancy and discussed Dorothy's options, including abortion. Whether Dorothy seriously considered ending the pregnancy is unknown, but given her religious scruples, it is unlikely. She took a two-week holiday from Benson's near the end of the month and retreated to a country cottage at Bovingdon in Hertfordshire, telling her parents that she wanted a place to write in solitude. What she really did there was to think through her situation.

Today, we can only begin to imagine the agonies of conscience she must have suffered. England after the war was a profoundly changed place; moral standards and behavioral rules had shifted dramatically in a relatively short time. In London, just as in New York and Chicago, the 1920s roared with sex, drugs, and jazz. But some things remained verboten, and for women of Dorothy's class and religion, unwed pregnancy was still at the top of the forbidden list. For Dorothy to have her baby openly and without a husband would have caused repercussions much more profound than the two-day sensation we might expect now. It would have meant lifelong shame for herself, her child, and her entire family. Her parents, in their seventies, would be humiliated. Dorothy would likely lose her job and all hope of financial independence. Her child would be a bastard, and she would be branded a sinner in the eyes of man as well as God.

What she decided, in that cottage in Bovingdon, was to stick it out on her own, hide the pregnancy, and tell no one. More than anything, she wanted to keep the secret from her parents, and that meant telling no one who might, by the remotest chance, let the story out. None of her closest friends from Oxford, no one at Benson's, no family member. (Biographer Barbara Reynolds has uncovered evidence that Dorothy received assistance from an unexpected source: Bill White's wife. Dorothy apparently didn't know of White's marriage until she told him about the pregnancy.)

There was, however, one possible avenue out. Her cousin Ivy Shrimpton and Ivy's recently widowed mother, Amy, were supporting themselves by raising foster children in their Cowley home near Oxford. Dorothy had grown away from Ivy, but they were still friends, and Dorothy had received glowing reports from her own mother of Ivy's excellent care of the children. Here was a ray of hope for the child. Although Dorothy delayed writing to Ivy until the last possible moment,

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the knowledge that she could place her baby in a loving home must have helped her through the long months ahead.

Bill White greeted the news with "helpless rage and misery." He drifted in and out of Dorothy's life until several months after the child's birth, when she finally told him to "go to hell." Dorothy may have considered marriage to White as an option, but the discovery that he was already married *and* a philanderer quickly closed that door.

Having decided to go it alone, Dorothy returned to Benson's, apparently her old lively self, and no one suspected what was happening beneath her billowing clothes. Thanks to her improved finances and her excellent cooking, she had been gaining weight for awhile before becoming pregnant, and her height also helped her carry the baby unobtrusively. She remained in good health throughout and experienced none of the typical symptoms that might have revealed her condition. Dorothy managed to hold off visits with her parents during the fall of 1923 and begged off Christmas by claiming that she was too busy with her new book: she told her parents to expect to see her at Easter. She remained at Benson's until her seventh month, then took two months' sick leave.

She had arranged to enter Tuckton Lodge, a maternity home in Southbourne, where Bill White's wife and young daughter lived. There on January 3, 1924, after a long and difficult labor, she gave birth to John Anthony. She registered her son in her own name, leaving the father's name officially blank although the baby was known by the surname White. She stayed at the hospital for three weeks, finally writing to Ivy two days before the baby's arrival. In this first letter, she pretended that the child was a friend's, but by the end of January, after Ivy had agreed to take the baby, Dorothy finally wrote the whole truth, asking Ivy to honor her confidence and leaving it up to her cousin whether or not to tell Aunt Amy.*

* It is eerie to read a letter that fourteen-year-old Dorothy wrote to Ivy Shrimpton in February 1908. Dorothy hesitantly but strongly criticized her cousin for judging others too harshly. She feared that people would become afraid of Ivy. She wrote, "I shouldn't like to feel, Ivy, that supposing sometime I sinned a great sin that I should be afraid to come to you for help, only, unless you would try to make allowances for me, I'm afraid I should." Ivy, however, was more than willing to make allowances when the time of need arrived.

"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 lifesaver, 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. J'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 puttered 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. Eustace 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)

- 1940 *Love All* (romantic comedy)
 1941 *The Man Born to Be King* (religious radio play series, BBC)
 1946 *The Just Vengeance* (religious play for Litchfield Festival)
 1951 *The Emperor Constantine* (religious play for Colchester Festival)

Translations

- 1929 *Tristan in Brittany*
 1949 *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine, Cantica I: Hell*
 1955 *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine, Cantica II: Purgatory*
 1957 *The Song of Roland*
 1962 *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine, Cantica III: Paradise*
 (translation completed by Dr. Barbara Reynolds after Dorothy Sayers's death)

Film and Video Adaptations

- 1935 *The Silent Passenger* British/Phoenix—original story by Basil Mason based on the character of Lord Peter Wimsey. (Sayers initially cooperated with the project but eventually disavowed it.)
 1940 *Busman's Honeymoon* (US: *Haunted Honeymoon*) British/MGM—adapted from the stage play by Monckton Hoffe, Angus Macphail, and Harold Goldman. Starred Robert Montgomery as Lord Peter and Constance Cummings as Harriet.
 1973–1977 The BBC produced its first series of full-length Peter Wimsey adaptations. Ian Carmichael starred, and though somewhat long in the tooth for the young Lord Peter, his performance catches the detective's fey qualities admirably. Productions include *Clouds of Witness*, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, *Murder Must Advertise*, *The Nine Tailors*, and *Five Red Herrings*.
 1987 A second BBC series focused on the Lord Peter–Harriet Vane relationship in *Strong Poison*, *Have His Carcase*, and *Gaudy Night*. Edward Petherbridge portrayed a nervy Wimsey in love.

THE LORD PETER FILE

NAME: Peter Death Bredon Wimsey (Lord Peter)

BIRTH DATE: 1890

NATIONALITY: English (with the saving grace of 1/8 French blood)

WIFE: Harriet Deborah Vane Wimsey (Lady Peter), mystery novelist

CHILDREN: Bredon Delagardie Peter (born 1936), Roger (born 1938), and Paul (born, probably, 1940)

FAMILY: Parents: Mortimer Gerald Bredon Wimsey, fifteenth Duke of

Denver (deceased) and Honoria Lucasta Delagardie Wimsey, the dowager duchess (known to good friends as "Lucy"). Elder brother: Gerald Wimsey, sixteenth Duke of Denver ("Jerry"), married to Helen and father of Saint-George (the heir apparent, known as "Pickled Gherkins") and Winifred. Younger sister, Lady Mary Wimsey ("Polly"), wife of Charles Parker and mother of Charles Peter and Mary Lucasta. (Chief-Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard—"the one who really does the work"—is Wimsey's best friend.)

ADDRESS: Ancestral home: Bredon Hall/Denver Castle, Duke's Denver, Norfolk; London flat at 110A Piccadilly (second floor, "directly opposite the Green Park"). Marital home in Audley Square, Mayfair. Country home, Talboys.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: "Physically, he should ideally be five feet nine and a half inches, clean shaven, fair hair brushed straight back, hawk nosed, fine hands, nervously energetic and with a rather light, not booming sort of voice. . . ." (as described by Dorothy L. Sayers in 1938). Disturbing grey eyes. Said once to look "like a melancholy adjutant stork." Dresses immaculately but "hates new clothes"; prefers Savile Row suits, matching socks and handkerchiefs, mauve silk pajamas, and a peacock-patterned bathrobe. Sometimes seen wearing a monocle (magnifying lens), carrying a malacca walking stick (concealed sword in the shaft and compass in the head) and a silver matchbox (flashlight). Extremely fit and can move "like a cat."

EDUCATION: Eton; Balliol College, Oxford University (First Class in modern history)

MILITARY SERVICE: Major in the Rifle Brigade, attached to military intelligence; active service, 1914-1918; wounded at Caudry in 1918; suffered shell shock after being buried in a bombed German "dug-out."

RELIGION: Church of England, although "I don't claim . . . to be a Christian or anything of that kind."

OCCUPATION: None, except for frequent semiofficial diplomatic missions for the Foreign Office and brief stint as an advertising copywriter.

AVOCATION: Private detection ("I sleuth, you know, for a hobby"); well-known collector of first editions and incunabula (books printed before 1501).

MAGNUM OPUS: *The Murderer's Vade-Mecum or 101 Ways of Causing Sudden Death*

INTERESTS: Music (plays piano, flute, and church bells; sings tenor; whistles Bach when pleased with himself), art, wine, fast cars, fast women (before Harriet); detective stories and crosswords. Plays serious card games very well, builds houses of cards when stressed. Ace at

cricket; swims like a fish; rides like the wind. Private clubs include Marlborough, Egotists', and Bellona.

FACTOTUM: Mervyn Bunter, who was Lord Peter's batman in the Great War and nursed him back to health. Valet, cook, nurse, photographer, chemist, undercover investigator. Very attractive to cooks and housemaids.

ROMANTIC HISTORY: Lord Peter received his sexual education at age seventeen, in Paris, under the tutelage of Uncle Paul Austin Delagardie. After leaving Oxford, engaged to Barbara, who dumped him in 1916. Long series of liaisons (e.g., a "spectacular Viennese singer"), close friendships (e.g., sculptress Marjorie Phelps), and professional entanglements (e.g., Dian de Momerie and Pamela Dean). Skilled lover ("I can produce testimonials") and one of England's most eligible bachelors. Forever faithful following 1935 marriage.

OTHER FRIENDS AND PROFESSIONAL ACQUAINTANCES: Miss Alexandra Katharine ("Kitty") Climpson of Pimlico (runs typing bureau-cum-investigation agency known as "the Cattery"); financial adviser, the Honorable Freddy Arbuthnot; attorney Jno. Murbles of Staple Inn; Sir Impey Biggs, England's most-feared defense barrister; forensic chemist Sir James Lubbock; Sir Andrew Mackenzie, chief of Scotland Yard; Inspector Sugg; journalists Salcombe Hardy and Waffles Newton; "Blindfold Bill" Rhumm, safecracker turned evangelist; the cream of the aristocracy, including godmother, the Countess of Severn and Thames, and the loftiest of British royalty; the Pope.

INDULGENCES: Fine wines (except champagne) and foods (except generic "cheese"); Villar y Villar cigars, Sobranie cigarettes, and a brier pipe; sleeping late; verbena-scented bathwater; Napoleon brandy. "Mrs. Merdle"—a custom-built Daimler. (In all, there are nine Mrs. Merdles, named for a character in Dickens's *Little Dorritt*.)

FIRST CASE: Unrecorded recovery of the Attenbury emeralds—or was it diamonds? (To be precise, Wimsey first appeared in an unfinished Sexton Blake short story Dorothy Sayers developed in 1920. She later used the storyline in "The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question.")

FIRST PUBLISHED WORDS: "Oh, damn!"

THE LOQUACIOUS LORD PETER

There are reticent detectives; there are talkative detectives. Then there is Lord Peter Wimsey, the most voluble of fiction's classic sleuths. While not quite up to the standards of the greatest English aphorists, Lord Pe-

ter can always turn a clever phrase in a dicey situation, and he rarely stoops to puns. A sample of Wimsey wisdom:

"Children are creatures of like passions with politicians and financiers."

Unnatural Death

"Time and trouble will train an advanced young woman, but an advanced old woman is uncontrollable by any earthly force."

Clouds of Witness

"You cannot trust these young women. No fixity of purpose. Except, of course, when you particularly want them to be yielding."

Murder Must Advertise

"Sex isn't a separate thing functioning away all by itself. It's usually found attached to a person of some sort."

Gandy Night

"Sex is every man's loco spot . . . he'll take a disappointment, but not a humiliation."

Whose Body?

"Always distrust the man who looks you straight in the eyes. He wants to prevent you from seeing something. Look for it."

Strong Poison

"Even idiots occasionally speak the truth accidentally."

Whose Body?

"Nothing is so virtuous as a bicycle. You can't imagine a bicyclist committing a crime . . . except of course murder or attempted murder."

Five Red Herrings

"Nobody minds coarseness but one must draw the line at cruelty."

"The Abominable History of the Man with Copper Fingers"

". . . after all, it isn't really difficult to write books. Especially if you either write a rotten story in good English or a good story in rotten English, which is as far as most people seem to get nowadays."

Unnatural Death

DOROTHY'S TRAVELING MAN

Although Lord Peter Wimsey was her main man, Dorothy L. Sayers created another male crime-solver early in her career. Montague Egg proved quite popular with magazine readers in the early 1930s, possibly as an antidote to the affectations of Lord Peter. "Monty" Egg is a crack salesman for Plummet and Rose, Wines and Spirits of Piccadilly. His job takes him from city to town to hamlet, where crime is always afoot. A World War One veteran—"fair-haired, well-mannered," and chubby-faced—young Monty has a natural gift for commerce and a flair for detection. Like all good salesmen, he is "by nature persistent and inquisitive," excellent qualities when uncovering wrongdoing and unmasking murderers.

The Monty Egg stories are classic Golden Age detection; little puzzles that must be solved by carefully applied inductive reasoning. Dorothy created Monty Egg while she was working as an advertising copywriter in London, a job that put her in daily contact with the practical aspects of salesmanship. She invested Monty with the necessities of the trade: cheerful personality, natty attire and scrupulous hygiene, a reliable little Morris automobile, respect for his customers, and intense loyalty to his employers and their potable wares. Monty has a habit of speaking in rhymes echoing his bible of the road, *The Salesman's Handbook*. Even the most modern of marketers might do well to heed the mottoes of Monty Egg:

"To serve the Public is the aim
of every salesman worth the name."

"Never miss a chance of learning
for that word spells '£' plus 'earning.'"

"The salesman who will use his brains
will spare himself a world of pains."

"Don't trust to luck, but be exact
and verify the smallest fact."

... and Monty's favorite:

"Speak the truth with cheerful ease
if you would both convince and please."

The Montague Egg stories are included in two story collections: *In the Teeth of the Evidence and Other Mysteries* and *Hangman's Holiday*.

MISS CLIMPSON AND COMPANY

As a feminist, Dorothy Sayers called for education and opportunity rather than mandated equality. In a 1938 lecture titled "Are Women Human?" she argued, "When it comes to a *choice*, then every man or woman has to choose as an individual human being, and, like a human being, take the consequences." But Dorothy felt special sympathy for one group—the huge number of unmarried women left by the devastation of Britain's male population in World War One. These women, Dorothy wrote in *Strong Poison*, "were of the class unkindly known as 'superfluous.' There were spinsters with small fixed incomes, or no income at all; widows without family; women deserted by peripatetic husbands and living on a restricted alimony, who . . . had no resources but bridge and boardinghouse gossip. There were retired and disappointed school-teachers; out-of-work actresses; courageous people who had failed with hat-shops and tea-parlours; and even a few Bright Young Things, for whom the cocktail-party and the night-club had grown boring."

In *Unnatural Death* and *Strong Poison*, Dorothy deployed Miss Alexandra Katharine ("Kitty") Climpson—a "thin, middle-aged" Edwardian lady—to assist Lord Peter. He sets her up in a stenography and typing business (called the Cattery in jest) and employs her unique investigative services when needed. Initially Kitty Climpson is used only as a bright busybody who can gather information because no one suspects her of ulterior motives. But Dorothy Sayers had something more in mind. As the character develops, readers discover that Miss Climpson is tough and determined, intelligent and insightful, morally strong but not doctrinaire, realistic in her outlook, imaginative in her methods, and physically courageous when need be. Miss Climpson represents the kind of individualist feminism that Dorothy believed in: Kitty makes the most of the hand she has been dealt and gets on with her work without grumbling. Dorothy tells the reader that Kitty "was a spinster made and not born—a perfectly womanly woman." "I should have liked a good education," Kitty says without bitterness, "but my dear father didn't believe in it for women."

Appealing spinster ladies appear in a number of Dorothy's mysteries. In *Strong Poison*, thirty-eight-year-old Miss Murchison is "a business woman all her life" who joins the Cattery. Marjorie Phelps in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* is a self-supporting sculptress who holds her own with Lord Peter. In *Murder Must Advertise*, Miss Meteyard, an Oxford-educated ad writer who "makes the vulgarest limericks ever recited within these chaste walls," is a single career woman based on the author. Harriet Vane, until she weds Lord Peter, is a thirtyish spinster struggling to make her way with integrity.

Dorothy Sayers understood the vulnerabilities of the "superfluous" class because she had been a member in good standing. She had the example of her father's three sisters: ". . . brought up without education or training, thrown, at my grandfather's death, into a world that had no use for them," she wrote to a friend in 1941. "From all such frustrate unhappiness, God keep us," she declared. "Let us be able to write 'hoc feci' [I did this] on our tombstones, even if all we have done is to clean the 29 floors on the International Stores."

THAT'S DOROTHY WITH AN L. . . .

A guaranteed way to raise Dorothy Leigh Sayers's hackles was to call her "Dorothy Sayers." She insisted that, at least in print and public forums, she be Dorothy L. Sayers. Her name, she patiently explained to an official of Oxford University Press in a 1936 letter, "is part of the author's 'publicity.'" She didn't think she was demanding too much; other women writers—Charlotte M. Yonge and Ethel M. Dell, for example—asked for and got the same.

In speech, she said, the use of "Dorothy Sayers" invited a mispronunciation (Say-yers, instead of Sayers to rhyme with "stairs") that she hated: ". . . my old headmistress always pronounced it so, and gave me a distaste for the form that I cannot get over." Besides, she contended, reviewers and such who used her name ought to take the trouble to write it properly. To Sir Hugh Walpole, she once confessed her preference for the L. to be "a foolish fancy," but she followed her own dictates—signing correspondence to all but her intimates as Dorothy L. Sayers, D.L.S., or sometimes Dorothy L. Fleming.

BBC announcers had an infuriating tendency to drop her middle initial in their broadcasts, and she was sometimes confused with a guitar-playing variety performer also named Dorothy Sayers. This mix-up led Dorothy L. to wish fancifully that the other woman might die first. In that event, she reasoned, people would be confused, and she could read her own obituaries.