



The Horizontal Man

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The young student, Molly Morrison, confesses to the murder of an English professor at Hollymount College, but Kate Innes doubts her guilt and decides to investigate.

The Horizontal Man Details

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Author : Helen Eustis

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From Reader Review The Horizontal Man for online ebook

Bill says

Interesting take on murder and psychology on a college campus in the 1940s. Dealing with the murder of a professor at an all girls' school, The Horizontal Man creates a rich stew of characters, and bounces pov between them all, creating psychological portraits of numerous academic types. The mystery is compelling and there are clues and red herrings galore, but the final revelation is not unexpected, having been hidden in plain sight. Few writers could get away with this solution today, but the time, when interest in Freud and psychoanalysis was at a peak, it must have been revelatory.

Kay says

Read for 2018 Popsugar Reading Challenge prompt "A book about mental health".

This story was written in the 1940s, and the time's biases against weight and mental health problems is on full display.

I am reading the Library of America two-volume set "Women Crime Writers," where this novel is included.

Jaksen says

This was a weird book, just weird.

First off, it's about a popular, handsome, debonair, poetic, young male teacher of English literature at a posh or elite girls' college circa 1943 or so. He's found dead, bludgeoned by a fireplace poker. (Pokers can come in so handy.) This happens on the very first page but the reader has no idea whodunnit.

The book moves along from various POVs: the dead man's neighbor across the hall; a fellow teacher and writer; a student infatuated with the dead man; a female teacher who's dried up at age 42 but willing to flirt with - or sleep with - anyone who's handy. (Please note: overuse of word 'handy.') There's also a 'chubby' female student who gets involved with a wise-guy reporter. It's actually these two who sort of pull the novel from scene to scene.

The problem is there's too much running around, rushing here and there, too much melodrama. The girl who adores the dead guy admits to killing him and is promptly rushed to a psychiatric hospital. She screams; she cries; she rants and raves. I suppose this is to be expected in a 1940's era novel, but nah, I've read a lot from this era, so not so much. It's just a handy place to stick a suspect where they'll more or less stay put.

The best thing about the book is this, though: the twist, or whodunnit, which is marvelously done. I was absolutely stunned/flabbergasted/surprised at the ending, and for its time, it made perfect sense. I missed it! Shoulda seen it!

So a fun read, an exhausting read. Lots of drama, big scenes, people shouting and rushing hither and yon.

Three stars.

Robin Friedman says

The Library of America has released a two-volume set "Women Crime Writers" (2015) consisting of eight crime novels written by women in the 1940s and 1950s. It is absorbing to work through this collection which is edited by Sarah Weinman, a scholar of women's crime fiction. Helen Eustis' novel, "The Horizontal Man" (1946) is the second book in the collection and the LOA has released it separately as an e-book. Eustis' novel won the Edgar Award for the best first crime novel but has received little subsequent attention.

The novel is set in an Ivy League women's college in the 1940s. The plot revolves around the brutal murder of a young professor of English, Kevin Boyle who had been attractive to many women. The novel presents a small group of characters and suspects, including Molly Morrisson, a young, impressionable student, two colleagues of Boyle, Marks, and Hungerford, a middle-aged woman who exudes sexuality, Mrs. Cramm. Eustis develops each of her characters well. They are interesting for themselves and for their satirical portrayal of university life as well as for their possible role in the murder. Other characters in the novel include the college president who is anxious to avoid unfavorable publicity for the school, a reporter clumsily investigating the murder, and a psychiatrist Dr. Forstmann.

The book's wry observations about love, college life, and literature are at least as important as the solving of the murder. The book has a heavily psychological, Freudian cast evidenced in the portrayal of Forstmann. This mid-20th century novel shows and accepts social and sexual mores different in many respects from those of today. It is valuable to be reminded of changing perspectives to avoid taking one's own point of view as absolute. At one key point of the novel, Forstmann adopts the words of one of the characters and suggests that life can be viewed as exhibiting a "poetry of unreason". Forstmann explains:

"Because psychiatrists aren't intended to be poets, they're scientists, they're obliged professionally to take the dew off the rose and analyze it as H₂O. That's their function. But when, on my busman's holidays, I've thought of madness, it seems more easily explained to me as poetry in action. A life of symbol rather than reality. On paper one can understand Gulliver, or Kafka, or Dante. But let a man go about behaving as if he were a giant or a midget, or caught in a cosmic plot directed at himself, or in heaven or hell, and we feel horror -- we want to disavow him, to proclaim his as far as possible removed from ourselves."

The late Helen Eustis (1916 -- January 11, 2015) attended Smith College and did graduate work at Columbia. She wrote several novels and stories in addition to "The Horizontal Man", including a Civil War novel, "The Fool Killer" which in 1965 was made into a film starring Anthony Perkins. In her latter years, Eustis translated several important books from French including "When I was Old" by Georges Simeon.

I was glad to get to know this fine, little-known novel and to learn something about its author. The LOA and Sarah Wineman deserve kudos for preserving the work of women crime writers, including Helen Eustis, as part of America's literature.

Robin Friedman

Brett says

Read this one in the (so far) excellent "Women Crime Writers of the 40's and 50's" collection from Library of America. Lots of great criminal psychology stuff here in a way that still holds up today, and must have been fairly cutting edge at the time. There's also some dubious pleasures in the very outmoded and un-PC descriptions of the women characters, but while would-be detective Kate Innes is often depicted in very visually unflattering terms, she is the book's erstwhile heroine and "gets the guy." Never heard of Eustis before, and am thankful for this collection to hip me to her writing.

Colleen Hannakan says

Essentially a murder mystery. But containing beautiful, non-clinical descriptions of the roots and experience of mental illness.

Susan says

This 1940s suspense novel is set at a women's college where a popular professor and poet has been murdered. The obvious suspect is a young, hysterical student with a severe crush on the deceased, but a young reporter and another student search for the real culprit. The varied characters, quick pace, academic setting, and humorous asides made this an enjoyable read, although I did get a little tired of the ramblings of the hysterical student

Karen says

Reading this in a collection of 40's crime novels. This one was fun--some good dialogue and a true whodunit--but a bit dated, doesn't hold up as well as "Laura" did, in my opinion. This doesn't always bother me, but here the attitudes towards women (which I'm sure are true to the period) are at times a bit hard to take and just as obnoxious as they'd be if a man had written this book. Spoiler Alert: Couldn't help thinking of "Psycho" and wondering if Robert Bloch was influenced by "The Horizontal Man."

David says

Strong murder novel set at an all-women college. Nice use of multiple POV and some really fun, witty dialogue. The solution is much easier to spot now than it probably was in the 1940s, but the other pleasures make up for it.

Part of the Library of America's Women Crime Writers collection.

Dorothy says

Eustis' novel won the Edgar Award for the best first crime novel but has received little subsequent attention. Some elements have not aged well, but the backbone of the novel remains an excellent suspense treatise on mental illness. It would have made a great noir film in the vein of *Gaslight*.

I read it as one of the novels bundled in the *Women Crime Writers: Four Suspense Novels of the 1940s*, edited by Sarah Weinman. The other authors are: Vera Caspary (Laura), Dorothy B. Hughes (*In A Lonely Place*), and Elizabeth Sanxay Holding (*The Blank Wall*).

Eustis (1916-2015) attended Smith College and did graduate work at Columbia. She wrote several novels and stories in addition to "*The Horizontal Man*", including a Civil War novel, "*The Fool Killer*" which in 1965 was made into a film starring Anthony Perkins. In her latter years, Eustis translated several important books from French including "*When I was Old*" by Georges Simeon.

carlageek says

Though it took a chapter or two of this 1946 novel for me to warm to Eustis's flamboyant prose, once I did - oh, what an absolute delight. Nominally a murder mystery, *The Horizontal Man* is more significantly a hilarious skewering of a scandalized midcentury women's college, salted with some sensitive, if a bit tidily Freudian, psychology. It's erudite, insightful, and tremendous fun.

A rakish, handsome young English professor is murdered, and the entire campus of Hollymount College is shaken. (Based on the name, I would have guessed the model was Mount Holyoke, but evidently Eustis studied up the road at Smith.) Eustis paints the members of this campus community with wonderfully vivid insight and literary resonance that ranges from Kafka to Robert Louis Stevenson. There are a lot of characters here - a mousy professor and a brilliant, damaged one; a depressed student, a vapid student, and a prickly smart one; beleaguered administrators, and a thoughtful psychiatrist who muses about the "poetry of unreason," observing that mental disorders are built on symbolism and manifest in metaphor. Each of these characters has a unique voice and rounded complexity, presented with a constant wryness. The mystery itself might not be much to a modern reader - I solved it halfway through, and I'm hardly mystery reader. But it hardly matters, as the mystery isn't the point - the characters and the psychological subtleties of their relationships are.

This review gives a feminist interpretation of all the richness going on in this novel better than I could, highlighting the book's most delightful and brassy character, the dilettante lecturer Freda Cramm. Liberated by an ample divorce settlement, Mrs. Cramm is free to teach at the college as a hobby, and delights in intimidating men who can't make sense out of her sexuality or her power. There's feminist promise in the younger generation, too - in the person of a chubby, bespectacled senior, Kate Innis, who, in the book's only romantic thread, wins the heart of a newspaper reporter with her assertiveness. In one cute interchange, she's treating him with treacly sweetness which he instantly (and with good reason) distrusts. She asks if he expected her to be more crusty, and he replies, "It's the crust that got me."

Bibliophile says

Murder, madness and psychosexual drama at a women's college in the forties - if that's not the perfect rainy day read, I don't know what is.

This was apparently the author's debut novel, and she goes all in. There's the plucky college student who goes sleuthing, the cocky reporter who falls for her (and she for him, despite his constant "fatty" and "chubby" remarks), eccentric professors, a hysterical librarian, a majestic divorcee with a healthy sex drive, lovelorn girls with mental problems and a town doctor who has a hard time keeping up with the neuroses.

It's rather overwrought at times, well, almost all of the time, but that's part of the fun. I'm not sure the psychology could withstand a critical review, but then again, that's true for most of modern serial killer depictions too. The big twist is comically obvious from early on, but may not have been so for readers back in the day.

It's clumsy and messy, but if you can get past that (and the hopelessly dated gender stereotypes) it's a very fun read.

Robert Stewart says

This was an interesting read, and the author used some unusual devices, like stream of consciousness points of view mixed with more limited third-person narration. It is set at as a thinly veiled Smith College.

At about a quarter of the way into the book, I was thoroughly impressed. There was a lot subtle humor deftly done, like the college president's secretary sparing no opportunity to bolster his fragile ego. And one of the stream of consciousness chapters has a passage where the character in question imagines himself stalked by Death, only to have Death say hello--it was just a friendly campus policeman making the rounds.

But then the humor goes by the wayside--except for the chapters focused on the young reporter and his coed fellow sleuth and love interest. And here, unfortunately, the humor is somewhat forced and cliched. It comes across as a B-movie attempt at a "smart" couple.

James Lee says

The Horizontal Man by Helen Eustis is a murder mystery tautly written in an older, literate style more typical of fiction from the 1940s and 1950s. This book won an Edgar Award for Best First Novel in 1947. Eustis, by the way, passed away in January, 2015 at the age of 98.

The scene is set early. Kevin Boyle, a young English professor, is murdered on the second page of the novel by a poker-wielding assailant. Plenty of suspects abound within the claustrophobic confines of all-girls Hollymount College in Connecticut. Eustis may be evoking memories of her own alma mater, Smith College: "The brick faces of the neo-Gothic buildings shown bleakly in the night."

Student Kate Innes and Jack Donnelly, a reporter from the local newspaper, set out to investigate the crime.

Kate is introduced in one scene as editor of *The Holly*, presumably the student newspaper, or perhaps a literary magazine. Early on a love-besotted freshman confesses to the murder and is placed in the college Infirmary because of her unbalanced psychological state. Was she really the killer? Or was it Freda Cramm, a loud-mouthed bully of a woman who evidently had a thing for Boyle? Was it his milquetoast (as he is labeled in the text) neighbor, English professor Leonard Marks, or Professor George Hungerford, the most prominent scholar in the department?

Kate and Jack do the requisite sleuthing, even to the point of crashing an English Department party by hiding out in the host's unheated sun room during a cold winter night. Their diligence leads to many false trails until the murderer is finally discovered by psychologist Dr. Forstmann – although most readers will have figured it out, or at least suspected it, before the reveal.

A word of caution. What passes for witty banter between Jack and Kate would get the young man in trouble today possibly for harassment, or at least gross insensitivity. “Tell you what, Chubby, if I thought you could look other than if you’d just crawled out from under a car, I’d ask you to take in a flick with me Friday night.”

Earlier the president of the college objects to Kate’s appearance in blue jeans and a sweatshirt,” You look terrible. You girls are a blot on the institution of womanhood.”

The modern reader can only cringe and move on, grateful for more enlightened times.

Justin Howe says

Enjoyable in parts but from that era when the culprit's motive stems from their being non-cisheteronormative.

Carol Masciola says

A young literature professor (Boyle) at an all-girls college is fatally whacked over the head with a fireplace poker in his apartment in the first pages of the book. The rest is a whodunnit as we consider the suspects: a freshman (Molly) who had a sickening crush on Boyle, a sexy older divorcee who teaches lit. at the college, the socially awkward neighbor (Leonard), etc. This book was written in the 1940s, and so it has that charming old-fashioned depiction of social relations and manners and clothes. Perhaps the downside for the reader will be that the resolution doesn't seem as surprising today as it did to a reader of the time. I knew who did it and exactly why very early on. There is a nice romance between a cocky newsman and a senior girl (Kate) at the college who are trying to solve the mystery.

Tony says

THE HORIZONTAL MAN. (1946). Helen Eustis. ***1/2.

A murder takes place in a young teacher’s room, and we are immediately faced with the killer; or are we? This was the first of innumerable red herrings that were sprinkled throughout this novel. I’m not giving

anything away, we are soon aware of the misdirection by page three. The author cleverly leads us on a merry chase through a large number of potential killers, set in a girls' school in New England. The point of difference in this novel (Edgar Award for Best First Novel in 1947) is that Ms. Eustis draws on new motives for killing drawn on then new information drawn from the world of psychology and psychiatric research. The story becomes a bit frenetic towards the end, but it was a new approach to the structure of a crime novel. It was a treat to discover this writer, and I again salute the Library of America for bringing it to my attention.

William says

This book won an Edgar for best first novel in 1946. It's interesting for readers interested in the mystery genre to look back in time and see what was respected in the past. Unfortunately, I found this both dated and uninspired.

Eustis attended Smith College, on which this book is loosely based. I did find it interesting to have a glimpse of life at a women's college in this decade, though it is a very superficial one. But aside from that, "Horizontal Man" had little to recommend itself, and was actually a faintly annoying read.

The fun in mysteries is both in the plot and the characters. The plot here is pretty easy to suss out as you read, and personally I found the outcome unsatisfying. I also cannot point to an interesting and believable character. They are all stereotypes of one kind or another, though they may well have been based on Eustis's actual college professors. Jack Donnelly is your basic cub reporter, Leonard Marks is a garden variety neurotic, and Freda Cramm could have been played on the screen by Margaret Dumont from the Marx Brothers entourage. Most of the characters are also in relationships or friendships which defy credibility. These do not seem people who would be attracted to each other (or maybe I just found all of them unlikable).

I'm guessing this is one of the first mysteries to use psychoanalytic theory. It might have been startling in the 1940's, but it's very old hat stuff today, and comes across as "psychobabble." I kept thinking (along with many other readers) of Hitchcock's "Psycho," but also of the work of Ruth Rendell, both of which explore deviant psychology much more effectively.

I did not find this book to be well-written. The prose is frequently pompous, convoluted and pompous, and paragraphs often run longer than they should. Despite that, it reads fairly easily and quickly. Interesting perhaps as a historical artifact, but not satisfying as a mystery, I'm afraid.

Michael says

An excellent read!

A wonderful first half that peters out a little toward the end. There isn't enough sarcasm in the second half. I found some of the characters, esp. Kate really easy to relate to.

Michelle Heeter says

It's rare that I don't finish a book, but this is one of the worst novels I've picked up in a long time. Of

historical interest only.
