

Death and the Dancing Footman

Ngaio Marsh

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The party's over when murder makes an entrance...

With the notion of bringing together the most bitter of enemies for his own amusement, a bored, mischievous millionaire throws a house party. As a brutal snowstorm strands the unhappy guests, the party receives a most unwelcome visitor: death. Now the brilliant inspector Roderick Alleyn must step in to decipher who at the party is capable of cold-blooded murder...

Death and the Dancing Footman Details


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From Reader Review *Death and the Dancing Footman* for online ebook

Victoria Mixon says

What's not to love about a murder mystery that gets solved because somebody's footman can't resist shaking his booty to "Boops-a-Daisy" when nobody's looking?

Ngaio Marsh cheats shamelessly when she throws in innumerable clues to the guilt of someone who, for that much authorial attention, really has no business wandering off scot-free. The solution's a bit Ellery Queen-ish, and the descriptions of a jolly brass Buddha as some kind of ghastly, horrifying relic of a loathsome pagan cult get old. (Has she ever taken a quick gander at the main emblem of the Church of England?)

But, hey. It's Chief Inspector-Detective Alleyn. I'm totally and completely addicted to that guy.

And, people--the footman was *dancing*.

Susan says

Published in 1942, this is the eleventh of the series featuring Roderick Alleyn. Although this was published during wartime, and the war is mentioned, this feels more as though it were written during the very early months of the conflict, with mentions of various characters looking to enlist and comments of surgeons being needed as time goes on.

That said, wartime or not, country house parties are obviously still going on and host, Jonathan Royal, is planning one with a difference. In fact, he decides to throw a house party, where all the guests are enemies and then see what happens. So there is a lady whose face was ruined by plastic surgery, along with the surgeon who destroyed her looks, two brothers, one of whom is engaged to a young woman who was previously engaged to the other, two women who run competing beauty salons and a famous playwright, and friend of the host, who is meant to act as the audience, although he also has a secret that he wishes to keep hidden. Alongside these issues, are other complications of love and jealousy and interlocking relationships – such as the fact the two brothers are the sons of the victim of disastrous plastic surgery.

As you can imagine, a house party filled with so much intrigue and emotion, is not likely to go well. As the weather changes, and the guests are snowed in, the arguments brew and the hatred becomes, literally, murderous. Alleyn, meanwhile, is staying at the house of a rector, who appeared in an earlier novel, “Overture to Death,” and finds himself unwillingly called in to investigate events. This is a good addition to the series, with an interesting concept. So often, in Golden Age detective novels, we read of house parties which go wrong, but never usually because they are designed to do so! An enjoyable read, good setting and good cast of suspects make this very readable.

Krista says

Ah, Ngaio Marsh. What is it about you that I don't really care about whodunit?

I figured this one out. Easily. The mystery was thin and rather transparent.

But who cares? Especially when one gets to relish in her characterizations and her way with words. Descriptions like these make these cozies worth reading, even if you aren't a mystery buff;

"A popinjay," he muttered, "a stock figure of dubious gallantry." And he pronounced the noise usually associated with the word "Pshaw."

"... [he's] bone from the eyes up if you try to talk about anything that's not quite his language."

After a good deal of demurring, Jonathan finally rang the bell. Caper answered it and accepted the news of sudden death and homicide with an aplomb which Mandrake had imagined to be at the command only of family servants in somewhat dated comedies."

S Dizzy says

(08/21/18 at 6:15pm CST) So far, I have only gotten through the list of Jonathan's invited guests and I chuckled. I must say, he is deliciously sneaky to compile this list of unsuspecting guests who have issues with one another. This mix of people will definitely bring the high drama. Let's raise the curtain and see what transpires. (I think this appeals to a dark part of my humor.) No wonder someone ends up liquidated. *"It seems to me," said Mandrake, "that you have invited stark murder to your house. Frankly, I can imagine nothing more terrifying than the prospect of this weekend. What do you propose to do with them?"* Jonathan replied, *"Let them enact their drama."*

(08/24/18 at 8pm CST) I have finished this bit of theatrics. Even though I correctly guessed the murderer, it was still enthralling. Interestingly, it mentioned the term "cosy murder."

Heather says

Ambitious, brutal, and flawed.

I thought that NM tried something different in this book, but didn't necessarily pull it off. In every book she seems to skewer some group, whether it is aspiring actresses or folk dancers or surrealist playwrights, and initially, I wasn't sure who she was skewering. There were a few digs at experimental theater, but instead of really sinking in her teeth, she chose to make Aubrey Mandrake sympathetic rather than absurd. So who is getting the NM Treatment? Ultimately, I think it's her own kind: mystery writers. Those ridiculous people who create elaborate crimes with such improbable, arcane explanations that it takes a creature like Sherlock Holmes or Peter Wimsey to solve them. (She even makes a dig at Busman's Honeymoon.) Roderick Alleyn has never been at his most prosaic. He's a husband on a holiday who doesn't want to go out in the bad weather. (And he does rise to the challenge admirably, but only in the last 1/5 of the book.) He shuffles in late and reluctant, stares at a gloriously gothic mess of snow and ego and murder, and produces... the most

obvious of answers. As literary commentary, this is a direct hit. But I'm not sure how successful it is. She deliberately deflates her own plot to make the point that mysteries are often ridiculous. She's right, but I'm not sure it did her story any favors.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

Jonathan, a lonely and cantankerous bachelor, decides to hold a house party of people he knows will dislike at least one other member of the party, sit back and watch the duh-rammma unfold. Kind of like "reality TV" today. However, of course he gets more than he bargained for, as an apparently dull and innocent young man is murdered in a most distressing and uncouth way--getting his head bashed in with a Maori *mere*! Whodunit and how, since the rest of the party were just on the other side of the door in the next room? And what's the deal with the "dancing footman" of the title? Ahhh now, that would be telling. I enjoyed the yarn, the red herrings were quite good and the language from the outset was cosy and carried me along. Not only is there a house party, but they are snowed in and therefore cut off from the outside world for the two or three days it takes for it all to happen.

A good puzzler, though it resonates with earlier works of Dorothy Sayers and Eleanor Hallowell Abbot. I was strongly reminded of EHA's *Rainy Week*, in which a thoroughly unpleasant couple make a habit of inviting people who don't know each other for what they know will be the rainiest week of the year, based on their talents or other aspects that will make them good unwitting characters in a psychodrama, known only to their hosts. One of the characters of Marsh's houseparty murder actually references Sayers' book by its title, which I won't mention here so as not to spoil this book for anyone who's read the other. Both were written before this Inspector Alleyn novel, so I'm not pulling the connections out of thin air. *Marsh is obsessed with the female characters' hands in this book for some reason--of one she says "her hands looked exhausted"--???, and of another that she sits down and "crosses her wrists in her lap." Really? I tried that several times, and a more unnatural and uncomfortable position for the hands I cannot imagine. Maybe she originally meant to have the woman cross her ankles or her legs and decided it wasn't ladylike. I was reminded of an old sketch by Sesame Street's Bert and Ernie in which Ernie says Bert's nose is run down and his hair looks tired! Also, for some reason Marsh found it advisable to have Alleyn say things "vaguely" all the time. What that means when discussing a murder or talking to suspects, I cannot tell you.*

The book did bog down a bit after the actual murder, when Alleyn, The Girl and the Anti-hero are driving over the hills through post-blizzard snow to get much-needed medical supplies. They do a lot of talking over the case--something that I, who grew up in blizzard country, know would not happen if one of the talkers-over is the driver. You don't divide your concentration when driving through deep, fresh snow on country roads with no snowtires, ABS or power steering! It got awfully "talky", but at least there wasn't a tiresome map to deal with, and it did pick up again. I thought I had the killer taped at least twice, and was wrong both times.

Andree says

3.5 stars, but rounding up, because I think it's one of the better Marsh's.

The pros:

-They mystery itself is solid. And sort of appropriately unpleasant.

- There is no Nigel Bathgate, who, when he has a reason to be around is fine, but when he doesn't is tedious (e.g.: "A Surfeit of Lampreys")
- Troy makes an exceptionally brief appearance
- The host is fairly awful, in an effective way. He invites a bunch of people who hate each other to his house for the weekend, because he's bored, and interested in psychology. And surprise, surprise, someone winds up dead.
- I kind of like the secondary romance, even if it's another case of super insta-love.

The (minor) cons:

- It takes 2/3 of the book for Alleyn to put it an appearance.
- The snowstorm feels awfully convenient.
- A lot of the characters are fairly terrible.

Still, I liked this one. This one is an effective character driven mystery.

Bev Taylor says

Jonathan Royce invites 8 people to spend a winter weekend with him.

They, alone or in groups, were unconnected to one another but Jonathan knew what lay beneath the surface of each one

How it all went terrifying wrong. 2 attempted murders, one successful and one suicide

Were all these events related and administered by the same person? or were there more grudges to bear and false leads being laid all of which seemed to lead to one person

Alleyn only arrives after two thirds of the novel has passed and then it was only by chance that he was in the area

Great characterisation although one could see through the plot quite early on. Surprised that Mandrake did not home in on it for his list of motives - it is one of the most basic and common reasons for murder

This author had a distinctive way of writing and I love the way she puts thoughts alongside speech, giving us 2 sides

Had to check the dictionary a few times! Would also have liked a translation of the French verse that Jonathan relayed

Wonder if the plea would have been insanity also what happened to the Compline estate

Bev

Ivonne Rovira says

Needless to say, Dame Ngaio Marsh can write some riveting mysteries: *Death In A White Tie*, *A Man Lay Dead*, and *Enter A Murderer* come immediately to mind. However, at times, Marsh becomes so enthralled with ridiculing some of her characters that she spends entirely too much time on the back story and her writing veers into tiresome parody. Such was the case in *Overture To Death*, first published in 1939. So, too, with *Death and the Dancing Footman*, published two years later.

The flamboyant Jonathan Royal cruelly invites six guests who are mortal enemies to a house party, counting on an upcoming wintry storm to keep them housebound and at each other's throats. Such is the twisted Royal's idea of fine entertainment. So far, so good. However, some of the other characters never transcend into three-dimensional characters: the Complines, Francis Hart, and Madame Lisse descend into exaggerated archetypes rather than real people. By the time of the murder, halfway through the book, I was ready to chuck it in, and I very nearly didn't finish the book! I never thought I'd say that about a Ngaio Marsh book! Additionally, Inspector Roderick Alleyn doesn't put in an appearance until two-thirds of the way through the book. The book could have easily be trimmed by 50 pages and have been vastly improved.

If you're looking to skip a Ngaio Marsh book, make it this one.

Bev says

Death & the Dancing Footman (1941) by Ngaio Marsh is one of those Golden Age mystery stand-bys: a murder at a country house party--and in the middle of a snow storm no less. But Marsh gives the standard a slight twist. Jonathan Royal, who by his own reckoning is a stifled artist, has decided to use human beings in a drama of his own contrivance. He has deliberately invited a houseful of guests where each person is at odds with at least one other person (and sometimes more). And he has invited Aubrey Mandrake, a poet dramatist, to be his impartial audience.

It came to me that human beings could, with a little judicious arrangement, be as carefully "composed" as the figures in a picture. One had only to restrict them a little, confine them within the decent boundaries of a suitable canvas, and they would make a pattern...Of course, the right--how shall I put it?--the right ingredients must be selected, and this was where I came in. I would set my palette with human colours, and the picture would paint itself.

Aubrey Mandrake is horrified. "It seems to me that you have invited stark murder to your house. Frankly, I can imagine nothing more terrifying than the prospect of this week-end." And, yet, it is the horrified fascination of someone watching a train-wreck. He can't not stay and watch the drama unfold.

And unfold it does though the guests do try to keep a civil and even sometimes party atmosphere going until Aubrey is shoved into the freezing waters of the outdoor pool and both Nicholas Compline and Dr. Francis Hart each claim the other has mistaken Aubrey for themselves and that murder has been attempted. Other attempts are made...but when death final comes, it strikes an unexpected target. Mandrake sets out through the drifts of snow to bring back Inspector Roderick Alleyn--who he knows to be staying in the near-by village. Alleyn will have to comb through all the clues to discover if it is a case of a victim by mistake or if the murderer got the results intended all along.

One of the delights of this book for me is the naming of the butler. A butler named Caper just seems so perfect for a mystery given one of its definitions as "an activity or escapade, typically one that is illicit or ridiculous." It's also quite apt in a book that has a dancing footman to have someone named after a word for

"skip or dance about in a lively or playful way." Marsh must have thought it a bit much to actually name the footman Caper, but obviously couldn't resist implying that the butler might once have capered about himself when he was young.

I did find myself missing Alleyn for a huge chunk of the book. He doesn't show up until the story is two-thirds along and even then he's without Fox, his right-hand man. I enjoy their interactions very much and wish that we had had more time with their investigation. But the twist on the country house murder was very interesting and made for an enjoyable read overall.

First posted on my blog [My Reader's Block](#). Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

Louise Culmer says

A house party of ill assorted guests leads to tensions, arguments, and eventually murder. This one is quite enjoyable, and there are some interesting characters. I remained uncertain of the identity of the murderer until the end, which is always satisfactory. Unfortunately Alleyn does not appear until two two thirds of the way through the book, and Inspector Fox only towards the end. The conversations between Fox and Alleyn are one of the most enjoyable features of this series, so this is a bit disappointing. Despite that, an entertaining book.

FangirlNation says

In *Death and the Dancing Footman*, one of Ngaio Marsh's most creative, complex, and crazy books, Jonathan Royal has decided that he needs to work out his aesthetic cravings. However, Jonathan is no good at writing or art, so he has decided to work out his frustrations in the genre of human manipulation. He conceives of the idea of planning a weekend party at his estate of Highfold at which the guests are all at daggers drawn towards each other. And Jonathan will direct the action. He first introduces us to the Compline family. William is the excessively devoted son and Nicholas the ungrateful, blackguard of a son, but their mother, Sonia, favors Nicholas. Recently, William has become engaged to Chloris Wynne, who used to be engaged to Nicholas. This creates the first set of conflicts. The Compline family has a good friend, Hersey Amblington, a cousin of Jonathan's who owns a spa and beauty salon. Hersey's greatest rival is "the pirate," Madame Elise Lise, who has set up her own competing salon across their small town. Madame Lise is but the chief of several women Nicholas philanderer with, driving Chloris out of his arms and into William's. But Nicholas also has a rival for Madame Elise's affections, a plastic surgeon named Dr. Francis Hart. The final crazy twist is that the career of Dr. Hart is one calculated to create horror in Sonia Compline because over 20 years earlier, a plastic surgeon destroyed her face. And to conclude, art must have an audience, so Jonathan brings in the famous, surrealist playwright, Aubrey Mandrake. With all this hatred floating around Highfold, it comes as no surprise to anyone but Jonathan that someone gets murdered.

Read the rest of this review and other fun, geeky articles at [Fangirl Nation](#)

Sara says

E' anche più bello dei gialli della Christie, ai quali, come si legge nella quarta di copertina, è sempre stato

paragonato. Ricorda molto i giochi da tavolo tipo Cluedo, dove l'azione si svolge tutta all'interno di una lussuosa dimora di inizio/metà Novecento con tanto di maggiordomo. Ma vi anticipo che non è stato lui. A dire il vero non è che il colpo di scena finale sia così stupefacente e la maggior parte dei lettori saprà su chi far cadere i giusti sospetti già un paio di capitoli dopo il delitto, ma è piacevole il ritratto dei personaggi, l'intrecciarsi delle loro vicende e le debolezze che nascondono un passato abbastanza travagliato. Di azione ce n'è veramente poca e a forza di leggere i particolari delle tre stanze clou (salottino, fumoir e biblioteca), le si impara a conoscere quasi fossero parte di casa nostra. E' un giallo "di ambientazione", anche se, svolgendosi in un periodo notevole come la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, un legame con gli eventi storici avrebbe aggiunto sale alla faccenda. Comunque molto ben scritto.

Gillian Kevern says

I loved this! I think it may be my new favourite Ngaio Marsh.

I must have read this before, but I had no memory of it. I picked out a suspect early on and thought 'I must have read this before, because X is obviously guilty.' And the story continued and more and more clues pointing to X were found--and then the rug was pulled completely out from under me. I did not see the solution--and it fell together perfectly.

Death and the Dancing Footman is also interesting because it is a book written during the war, and it manages not to be hysteric or propaganda, something that does show up in other writers of this era, and a little bit in Ngaio Marsh's other books--the ones where Alleyn is in NZ doing spy stuff. This is a solid mystery set at a time on the home front where things were grim, but still business as usual.

Susan says

Did not like the premise at the beginning--seemed too controlling and manipulative of Jonathan Royal to have a weekend party where everyone started off with reasons not to like each other. The plastic surgery "mistake" was an interesting twist. As the book progressed, my likes and dislikes of the characters went back and forth. The romance was nice-- felt the people involved (no spoiler alert needed) were due something nice in life. And of course, snowbound people who have all sorts of quirks in their personalities makes for some sort of interesting story. I do like more Alleyn and Fox, and they were in short supply--especially Fox--although in the end, a conversation he had with Alleyn will remain my take-away from this title.

As I read these early British mysteries, what I focus on beyond the mystery story line is how the impending Nazi transgressions that were going on in the real world at the same time the books were being written or published are mentioned (or not). Slight sidebar comment: I recently read a book about Nancy Drew syndicate mysteries, and it was revealed that the publishing syndicate proactively tried to keep mention of WWII out of the books or else make it so generic as to not have it be known that WWII was going on. This way the books would be more "timeless" and not irrelevant in years further out.

In the British (and New Zealand, in this case) adult mysteries that I have been reading the past twelve months or so, the authors make allusions to events in Germany or Nazis or what was happening on the continent. And so what interested me greatly when reading this particular title was that Alleyn had a conversation with Fox where he inquired about Fox's view of the impending war (remember, the book was

published in 1941). What I always find most appealing in Marsh's detective Alleyn is his depth of thought even when he is outwardly focused on police procedures. Here is the passage in Chapter XVI, Section v.

"I've never asked for your views on this war, Foxkin."

Fox stared at him. "On the war? Well, no sir, you haven't. My view is that it hasn't started."

"And mine. I believe that in a year's time we shall look back on these frozen weeks as on a strangely unreal period. Does it seem odd to you, Fox, that we should be here, so solemnly tracking down one squalid little murderer, so laboriously using our methods to peer into two deaths, while over our heads are stretched legions of guns? It's as if we stood on the edge of a cracking landslide, swatting flies."

"It's our job."

"And will continue to be so. But to hang someone--now! My god, Fox, it's almost funny."

"I see what you mean."

"It's nothing. Only one of those cold moments We'll get on with our cosy little murder."

Just a moment in the book, but it stopped me cold and provided some insight into Marsh's mind at this time. It also made me wonder if this is where the genre term "cozy mystery" originated or if it had previously been used to describe this particular mystery type that was being propagated by The Detection Club of Agatha Christie and her friends. I need to do more research on this.
