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Reduced to near penury by the iniquitous demands of the Inland Revenue, young barrister Julia Larwood spends the last of her savings on an Art Lovers holiday to Venice.

But poor, romantic Julia - how could she possibly have guessed that the ravishing fellow Art Lover for whom she conceived a fatal passion was himself an employee of the Inland Revenue? Or that her hard-won night of passion with him would end in murder- with her inscribed copy of the current Finance Act subsequently discovered just a few feet away from the corpse...

Thus Was Adonis Murdered Details

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From Reader Review Thus Was Adonis Murdered for online ebook

Lynn Spencer says

A very witty mystery indeed! Though I occasionally found this book slow going, I mostly enjoyed the moderately ridiculous world of barrister Julia Larwood and her friends, other fairly new barristers. If you enjoy dry wit, particularly dry wit employed in the depiction of all manner of wildly ridiculous escapades, you really should read this book.

Ann Herendeen says

Caudwell's four mysteries are so distinctive in voice and mood, the best word I can think of to describe them is "stylized." It's the sort of thing some readers adore and others probably hate (although it's hard for me to wrap my mind around that). Some readers may be put off by what one (admiring) critic called Caudwell's "distancing" techniques. Much of the action is told through letters, cables, narrations within letters within cables, etc.

"Adonis" is the first of the four books (Caudwell died young) and in my opinion the best, with the fourth book next in quality. The stories have the same main characters and setting: an office ("chambers") of brilliant young barristers who work in England's Chancery Court. This is a highly stylized world of its own, concerned with high-level financial crimes: stock fraud, estates and trusts, and so on.

The writing and storytelling style suits the setting: arch, satiric comedy. Never could I have imagined that obscure monetary irregularities could make for such entertaining reading. The main characters are a diverse bunch, from different backgrounds, each neatly portrayed so that the reader forms a clear mental picture early on. The sense of not-quite-heterosexuality that pervades the entire series was a big factor in my enjoyment as well.

I recommend reading the books in order. If, like me, you read "Adonis" and want more, right now, it's better to know from the start that four is all there is, and pace yourself accordingly.

Lightreads says

I always feel very clever when I find something brilliant and obscure, even when all I did was take a recommendation (thanks, Kate Nepveu!). A series of British mysteries, starring a brilliant but sometimes hapless collection of young barristers and an Oxford tutor who is either remarkably clever or remarkably nosy, depending on whom you ask.

What a delight. Rollickingly funny in places, with a particularly deft touch for letter writing. That distinctively British slant of straight-faced absurdity, if you know what I mean. And it's not until I read books so calmly nonjudgmental of bisexuality and kink as these that I'm reminded how toxic most of the mystery genre really is on the subject. Women who pursue people they want to fuck, and then fuck them to the delight of all involved, and then walk away with no shame or regret – can you imagine? And then at the

end, after all the misadventure and assorted amorous shenanigans that *don't* make people slutty or cheap or stupid, each of these books turns around and delivers a clever little solution. Something not just smart, but also pointed and a bit painful, so I breathed in carefully through the last couple pages of every one, as the knot of greed or madness or pain came loose.

Ah.

Anna says

This is probably the most charming murder mystery that I've ever read and it was great fun from start to finish. I loved the format: although the murder takes place in Venice, the point of view is always that of barristers in London. (As an aside, I googled for the appropriate collective noun but with equivocal results. It could be a bore of barristers, or a cluster, or a boast, or a wiggery. The question remains open.) This group are a snobbish and insular bunch, yet somehow endearing in their pomposity and idiosyncrasy. The actual narrator is a Professor who formerly taught them, but she remains largely enigmatic, allowing the focus to rest on the absurdities of Julia and her colleagues. Julia, whose letters pepper the text, is an utter delight. Obviously a high-flying barrister of some renown, she is characterised throughout as accident-prone, impractical, and partial to beautiful young men. Upon hearing that she's being accused of murder, her colleagues cannot believe that her physical co-ordination could possibly be sufficient for such an act.

Indeed, I almost felt that the murder was superfluous to the narrative. A mere travelogue of Julia's misadventures in Italy would have been very entertaining, if interpolated with commentary from her colleagues. The amusingly mannered style of dialogue and overall air of farce reminded me of P.G. Wodehouse, specifically the Blandings books. I also appreciated the fluid sexuality of apparently everyone involved and the huge importance they ascribed to coffee of a morning. The treatment of Cantrip, who elicited sympathy for having been educated at Cambridge rather than Oxford, also made me smile. The whole thing was a joyous romp, which seemed to treat the notion of murder with perhaps more levity than it deserved. I was definitely diverted. Thank you for the recommendation, Rae!

Liz says

The writing style was very difficult at first. Caudwell is way too wordy with run on sentences in which I lost track, at first. Then, I either got used to her style or so absorbed in the characters and the story that I go over my irritation and really enjoyed the book. I laughed out loud at the tongue-in-cheek, very British wit with which she wrote. The solution was a bit convoluted and required a re-read to get it. All in all, an enjoyable book.

Rita says

Any book by Sarah Caudwell is great. She had a limited number of her mysteries published before she died. Well told, with a dry, British humor twist. Highly recommend.

Migl? says

Kokia smagi knyga! Kažkas tarp "Trise valtyje" ir Agathos Christie. Jei nusikaltimo atskleidimas gal?jo b?ti kiek dramatiškesnis ar išsamiau paaiškintas, šitoje knygoje kažkaip netrukd?, nes ne viskas ? j? buvo suinvestuota. Skaityti buvo taip smagu, viskas persmelkta tokiu geru humoru, kad tai pamiršdavau (bet ger?ja prasme), tai v?l prisimindavau, kad ?ia detektyvas.

Trumpai tariant - mergina išvyksta atostog? ? Venecij? ir bando ten nusikabinti graž? bern?. Bet paskui jis randamas nužudytas j? inkriminuojan?iomis aplinkyb?mis. Londone lik? jos draugai, su profesor?s (ar -iaus, personažo lytis neatskleidžiama, bet aš ?sivaizdavau profesor?) pagalba bando per atstum? išsiaiškinti, kas ?vyko, kad ?rodyt? bi?iul?s nekaltum?.

Pateiksiu por? citat?. Apie kitus ?tariamuosius / britus užsienyje apskritai:

"The armour-plated matron has vented her martial spirit in complaining to the stewardess about the food. She is displeased with both the quality and the quantity. Her views on the former would make her, one might think, indifferent as to the latter - but not so: she declares it uneatable and demands a second helping."
"He studied his wine list with the furtive squint which has characterized the English abroad since the decline of the pound sterling: it comes of comparing prices while pretending to study the vintage."

Heroj?s nepriekaištingos logikos svarstymai apie tai, kaip geriausia išnaudoti aplinkybes (kanalus) siekiant pakabinti t? bern?:

"...you would recommend a pragmatic approach: not to base my plans on some theoretical first principle, but to examine the situation as it was and see what advantage could be taken of it.

This naturally led me to think of canals. We were in the city full of canals. How could this circumstance be turned to my advantage? One possibility would be to fall into one and be rescued by the beautiful young man. That, I thought, would surely lead to something. There was, however, a flaw in a scheme: I might fall into a canal, but the young man might not rescue me.

Another possibility would be for the young man to fall into one and be rescued by me. That seemed even more certain to lead to something. But I saw that this scheme also was by no means foolproof. The only way of ensuring that he fell into a canal would be to push him into it: unless this could be done with extraordinary discretion, the enterprise might well prove self-defeating."

dar heroj?s logikos apie tai, ar su jos simpatijos objektu atvyk?s kitas vyriškis (gal jo bernas, gal ne - heroj? nežino) turi pagrindo pavyd?ti:

"I had already established, as you know, that it was logically impossible for Kenneth to be distressed by anything that might occur between Ned and myself; but Kenneth, being an artist, has perhaps not studied logic and is unaware of the impossibility."

Labai graži formuluo? apie vedybas, tikiuosi ,rasiu prog? panaudoti:

"Julia honey,' she said, somewhere around the second grappa, 'do you think that marriage can be a valid interpersonal relationship in a life context?'"

Apie Otel? (ir karininkus):

"You see, the way Julia saw it was that a chap who'd spent all his life in the army was just the sort of chap to get a bee in his bonnet about pure womanhood and so on, because he wouldn't get the chance to find out that women were more or less like anyone else and he'd start getting all idealistic about them. So as soon as he

found out Desdemona wasn't perfect - I mean, the first time she spilt coffee or dropped cigarette ash on the carpet - he'd start feeling all disillusioned and thinking she'd betrayed his ideals. And after that, making him think she was having it off with some other chap would be absolute child's play."

Tikrai dar skaitysiu k? nors tos pa?ios autor?s. Dar labai nor??iau išversti šit? knyg? gryna? kad mama? duo?iau paskaityti, jai garantuotai patikt?.

Helen says

This is the first of four mysteries written by Sarah Caudwell, who passed away several years ago. The protagonists are young barristers in London, and the Oxford don (gender never disclosed) who assists them when they are faced with difficulties.

The books are very funny!! I mean, Jenny didn't like them, but whatev!

Excerpt:

"The procedure for taking advantage of Italian waiters--equally applicable, so far as I am aware, in other areas of the Mediterranean--does not merit any long exposition. It consists chiefly of staying bed until they bring one's breakfast and then smiling benevolently. Waiters, generally speaking, seem not to mind being taken advantage of.

"It is to be remembered, however, that they are an overworked and exploited profession, who have to spend much of their energies running to and from carrying drinks and so on, so that the duration of the pleasure given is not always commensurate to the enthusiasm with which it is offered. If the coffee brought me by the pretty waiter had been cold by the time he left, I should have been willing, int the particular circumstances, to forgive him; but my forgiveness was not called for."

Natalie says

This was delightful! A murder mystery involving a bunch of young English lawyers, narrated by their pretentious and socially obtuse former professor at Oxford. Full of witty banter, hilarity, and swapped gender roles. It's kind of like what I imagine would have happened if Oscar Wilde had rewritten Pale Fire as a charming and hilarious murder mystery.

Amanda Mitkov says

I just really could not get into this series of books, as much as I wanted to like them. There are many, many people who have read them and loved them, but I just didn't. The writing quite honestly gave me a headache and was so heavy handed, I could barely understand what the mystery was supposed to be. That doesn't mean they aren't worth reading, just not for everybody. I do love the cover art on them though, being a big Edward Gorey fan is what induced me to pick up this book in the first place.

GeraniumCat says

I adore this series, absolutely unreservedly. Love all the characters, the witty acerbic writing - just perfection.

Terri says

A young woman goes to Venice and is accused of murdering a young man in her tour group. Her co-workers back home read her letter and try to puzzle it together in a very irreverent way. I don't know what I was expecting but I had trouble with this book. I can certainly see the humor that is very British and over the top. The story is told through a series of letters from the woman to them amidst much commentary and speculation from the co-worker group. The language was hard for me to get into. It seemed very pompous and annoying for a book set in the 1980s and I kept thinking I was in the wrong era. Their commentary and speculation was an interesting way to tell the story but also fell flat at the same time (mostly I think because of the language and run on sentences).

A lot of people really love this book and I will say it was different from a lot of detective fiction out there. I just felt like it was more of a chore than a pleasure to get through. As for the mystery itself -- it was interesting and certainly had a dramatic reveal.

Shauna says

Erudite and witty with a distinctive style which I found refreshing and entertaining.

Harry says

Book Review

Scholarship asks, thank God, no recompense but Truth. It is not for the sake of material reward that she (Scholarship) pursues her (Truth) through the undergrowth of Ignorance, shining on Obscurity the bright torch of Reason and clearing aside the tangled thorns of Error with the keen secateurs of Intellect

Thus was Adonis Murdered and thus is his murderer extracted from obscurity: from indistinctness into certainty, from the labor of chase to the methods of scholarship, from the top floor of 62 New Square at Lincoln's inn to the black water canals of Venice we enter the sinister but light-hearted and very English world of professor Hilary Tamar as she pursues a killer.

Distancing is employed throughout the novel by the author Sarah Caudwell: an absurd British elitism takes place, woven into the first person narrative, an academic aristocracy that targets British lower orders of

solicitors, accountants, tax inspectors and Cambridge graduates. Frequently removed from the action and enjoying the role of a parental figure to her group of young barristers, professor Tamar acts as the main detective and confidently gathers her intelligence via a series of beautifully written letters and succinct telexes (this is written in 1981) sent back and forth between England and Italy.

To briefly intrude on this review, I have to say that this book for those of a certain age group will bring to the forefront a certain nostalgia we experienced in our days: the sad memory of receiving a letter via post, examining the stamp, the writing front and back, the relishment at guessing at its contents, and carefully opening it to its pages written in long hand, the cursive writing as much a clue to the personage writing it as my acquaintance of them in person. The very attraction to it all being the unambiguous display of personal information on the envelope and its inspired contents. Writing in long hand presupposed thought (we did not have Ctrl X, or Del, nor Ctrl C or Ctrl V). Thought and the careful delineation onto paper of those thoughts engendered the joy of receiving the results of it in letters. That era is gone and this book markedly reminds us as to the beauty of such correspondence.

Location is very important to Caudwell, in this case Venice, Italy. Julia Larwood, a somewhat clumsy but intelligent member of Tamar's group of young barristers and herself both a victim and expert in financial tax law, and while on an Art Tour in Venice finds no work of art quite as alluring as the beauteous Ned, our Adonis and a fellow tour member and ultimately our victim.

Julia, located in Venice, has written a letter to her friends at Lincoln's Inn. In it she remarks as to Ned:

The pressure of the crowds gathered to watch the spectacle brought me into closer proximity with the lovely Ned than could otherwise have been achieved. This, with heat and the wine I had drunk at lunch, induced in me a certain dizziness: I was hard put to it to refrain from any open advance.

I did consider, indeed, whether I should try fainting, as recommended by the dramatist Shakespeare. It seemed to me, however, that unless Ned felt obliged to carry me all the way back to my room at the Cytherea nothing of substance could be achieved by this. He does not seem to me the kind of young man who would readily undertake such a task.

And upon reading this passage, the retort from those gathered around the letter:

'I don't believe Shakespeare told Julia to try fainting,' said Cantrip. 'He's dead.'
'She's referring,' said Selena, 'to his early poem "Venus and Adonis". Julia read it at an impressionable age and has since regarded it as a sort of seduction manual. It's hardly Julia's fault. They told her at school that Shakespeare was educational'
'As I recall,' I said, 'the methods employed by the goddess in her pursuit of Adonis, though forceful, achieved only limited success. Doesn't Julia find that discouraging?'

The prose is written in a self-conscious literary style and includes many references on art history, art collections and subjects of higher learning. Before you begin to contemplate the idea that this novel is perhaps a little too removed and dry for your tastes, as the first few pages of the novel, or as perhaps I've alluded too in describing the distancing methods employed by Caudwell, or as the first paragraph of this review seems to indicate, do please read on.

What awaits you is an incredible plunge into British wit (second to none), filled with targeted barbed

comments aimed at forcing the intended victim to a response of emotional barbarity and yet resisted by the ever-present British proclivity to laugh at one's self in spite of it all. Hidden beneath the narrative is a remarkable openness (for the time) to sexual identities (interestingly, the narrator's sex throughout the entire series is unknown, another distancing method employed), this skulduggery while being served up with a literary and historical feast thankfully held together by an intricate mystery plot driven by an unmistakable prominence and regard for reason and intelligence so markedly absent in literature today is perhaps reason enough to have a look at Ms. Caudwells work. I certainly think so as often throughout its reading I burst into laughter at the self deprecating manner of the British, if not admiringly and open-eyed while considering the remarkable intelligence of this author.

Series Review

This is a series of four slim novels, often described as "legal whodunits" written over a period of 20 years. Centered around the lives of a professor and four young barristers practicing in Lincoln's inn: Michael Cantrip, Desmond Ragwort, Selena Jardine and Julia Larwood (with infrequent visits by Timothy Shepherd), characterized thinly but for their ironic tone and light-hearted and musing dialogue, these delightful characters come together to form the solutions towards murder with Professor Hilary Tamar acting as both a seeming parent with rather strong bonds to her young barristers, as well as acting the part of lead detective.

Sarah Caudwell

Sarah Caudwell was the pseudonym of Sarah Cockburn (27 May 1939 - 28 January 2000), herself a British barrister and professor of Medieval Law. She was one of the first two female students to join the Oxford Union and as legend has it, dressed up in men's clothes to protest against the Union's male-only membership policy. Possessing a brilliant mind, she joined the Chancery bar in 1966 and worked to excel in property and tax law. But it wasn't until her subsequent arrival at Lloyd's Bank where she became a senior executive in the trust department that Ms. Cockburn devised her pseudonym and began writing her highly popular (among British barristers, certainly!) Hilary Tamar series.

The books, as a general statement represent a feast for the mind. Though absent of a certain sense of lyricism, or poetic constitution, these books are regarded as nevertheless belonging to a literary mystery genre where language and dialogue take priority (Often throughout my readings I was taken aback by Caudwell's obvious mastery of the English syntax and word choices). To every witticism, to every wonderfully descriptive passage, to every spoken dialogue, the precision of word choice, concepts seeming to have been plucked from the ether and chosen so as to not leave the reader any doubt as to the intention of the passage can leave the reader slightly unnerved at one's own lack of understanding of English. The result is a highly satisfying experience by which the mind is replenished and inspiration awakened from its deep linguistic slumber.

Julie Bozza says

An interesting crime / 'amateur sleuth' novel, which holds the interest despite much of the action happening

at a distance and being relayed via a series of letters. I didn't anticipate the details of the resolution and yet it was all perfectly plausible, so that makes it a winner on the crime drama front.

I was inspired to read this book by the intriguing notion that we never discover the gender of the 'point of view' character, Professor Hilary Tamar. As a writer I wondered how that would be done. In the end, it's quite an easy matter of choosing a title and first name for the character that can equally apply to a man or a woman, and having Tamar narrate the novel in the first person. It helps, I suppose, that Tamar is rather older than the other characters, and has a genuine yet sort of benign interest in the attractiveness of the younger men and women in his/her life. It also helps that no one even bats an eyelid over those other characters being straight, gay or bi - and pursuing casual sex as they wish - therefore if/when Tamar ever falls in love or feels a carnal urge during other novels, the scene is set for his/her sexual biology and gender identity not to matter in the slightest.

I am left impressed and intrigued that Caudwell has chosen to write the character thus, and I wonder why this sort of thing isn't done more often... Though I know why, really. As I have already made clear in my responses to books on issues around intersex, I find our society's insistence on imposing a binary view of gender on everyone horribly frustrating and unnecessary. As I read this novel, I was interested to watch my own imaginings of Tamar: as the story unfolded, how would I 'see' him/her in my own mind? I found I wavered between a male and a female and an unspecified version... though because of the fact I've not so long ago written about a male Hilary of my own, he couldn't help but have an influence, especially a Hilary in his years before Tom wakes him up to love and life, as it were. Simply because of the name, my own imaginings were a bit skewed.

So! An interesting book, leisurely in tone, and very English in its characters and setting - with intriguing questions posed around issues of gender.

Meredith Holley says

Anyone who can tell a pretty hilarious Shakespeare joke is okay in my book. And this book is full of really hilarious Shakespeare jokes. Poor Desdemona. Oh, man. L, as they say, OL. And the slapstick. Oh, the slapstick! She gets it just right in that dry, British way, where you feel like she's describing something really elegant, but actually it's almost grotesque. This book was wonderful. I totally love it. I would give it five stars, except my undying devotion for Gaudy Night is making it impossible for me to do that. It's completely unfair because this book is so perfect on its own. But . . . there is still Gaudy Night, which makes me tear up from how much I love it. So, the star system is cheating Caudwell in this instance. (Edited: I had to go back and give them all five stars after finishing the last one because they are all so wonderful.)

I know I've said it before, but I'm not, as a rule, a fan of mysteries. I don't have a sense of suspense, so when suspense drags on for too long, I just get bored and stop caring. Mostly, though, it bothers me when I feel like you the author actually had nothing to say, but just picked out some random things, had the sleuth notice them, and then brought those things around in the end to be randomly the solution. I don't know why I'm reading that because they could be any facts. Like, the lipstick-stained cigarette, or the broken nail, or the powder on the lapel, or *what. ever*. It seems like machine-generated stories, where the author really has nothing to tell me. This book is the opposite of that. In this book, when the mystery wraps up in the end, the solution is the *meaning* of the story. It is why to read the book. I mean, the rest of the antics are great, but the solution is the purpose. I like that.

Oh, and the art law! Yay! The art law! It is just lovely. Art law is so fun. Most of art law has to do with inheritance and cultural artifacts, like it does in this book, and I think it is such an interesting topic. Don't worry, this book is mostly about cute boys and the silly antics of crime-solving lawyers and funny Shakespeare jokes, but the art law is *super* interesting and absolutely correct, if you're into that kind of thing.

I read this over spring break, lying by a pool in Palm Springs, and it was just perfect. There was a cute baby there, doing cute baby things, and good friends, good food, good book. So perfect. This is a wonderful beach read. It's put-down-able, but also pick-back-up-again-able. I wanted to know what was going to happen, but I didn't feel like if I put it down, I would be unable to hear the words of my friends trying to talk to me. Sometimes, with a beach read, I don't like to have something too engrossing because then if I start reading outside, I get sunburned because I forget I'm outside. Or, if I'm inside, I never see the light of day. Those books have their three-in-the-morning moments, but they are a commitment. They're like a friend who I really need a play-break from after a little while. Too much energy. This is like a perfectly lovely, reliable friend, who I hope to be more like someday. I have passed to another friend the copy that Elizabeth passed on to me, but I'm pretty positive I will read this book again someday, if only to remember all the funny Shakespeare stuff.

Patty says

Actually this was a DNF for me. I'm not sure why, I liked the premise and the characters mostly seemed okay. I think it might have been the language. it was very formal and very stilted my my inner ear. I also was easily confused when the reading of Julia's letters were happening. Someone would read a section, people listening would interrupt and comment and then back to the letters. Maybe it was that I didn't have enough long periods of time to read more than a few pages at a time. Either way, I finally gave up because it wasn't holding my attention.

Bev says

Julia's intrepid friends--consisting of her colleagues in chambers as well as Oxford don and sometime sleuth Hilary Tamar are the recipients of Julia's letters from abroad and soon learn that she is suspect number one in the murder of the beautiful Ned Watson. They determine to track down clues and haunt the fellow Art Lovers until proof can be found to persuade the Italian authorities of Julia's innocence. Somehow just the fact that the murder was too tidy for Julia to be responsible is just not as convincing to the Italian police.

Thus Was Adonis Murdered reads like a cross between Jane Austen, British drawing room comedy, and Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest written as a murder mystery. There are so many scenes that make up this upper-crust-sounding, yet slightly slap-dash amateur investigation so much fun to read. From the letters written by Julia that give us a firm idea of her intellectually sound but common sense starved self as well as the background for the murder to the barristers' shameless pumping of art aficionado Benjamin Dobble to Cantrip's interview with Major Linnaker, a shady art and antiques dealer, there are delights all along the way.

I really must share this tidbit from Cantrip (about the interview):

Was it really only two hours? It seemed much longer than that. Much longer. Much, much longer. The Major's known a lot of women. English women. Italian women. Arab women. Serbo-Croatian women. The right sort of women, the wrong sort of women. Women who would, women who wouldn't, women who might have. He told me about them all. Are you sure it was only two hours?

The light touch and light banter between the barristers make for a quick and entertaining read. I thoroughly enjoyed the dry British wit and sarcastic humor. There are also several very apt descriptions of the academic life and mind. Very appealing, fun, and interesting.

Back in 2011 when I read *The Shortest Way to Hades*, I made mention of the fact that nowhere in the story do we learn whether Hilary Tamar be male or female (and that I didn't really notice this until John at Pretty Sinister Books pointed it out). I had assumed that Hilary was a woman because Hilary is generally a feminine name in the US. And certain ways in which the other characters addressed our law-type scholar made me think s/he was female as well. This particular reading makes me think that Hilary is a man. There's something about the way s/he addresses fellow characters. Darn it. Caudwell is pretty good at this keeping a secret and mystifying the reader business. Now I'm curious to see which way I lean in book number three.

I love the Edward Gorey covers on these....one of the main reasons I first grabbed them up. I'm so glad that the stories live up to the covers.

First posted on my blog My Reader's Block. Please request permission before reposting. Thanks.

Megan says

"It's disappointing," said Ragwort, "that the young man has not turned out to be a homicidal maniac. But it can't be helped."

So a few book reviews ago I was all "I don't like amateur detectives!" and now here I am, head-over-heels for a amateur detective mystery series.

In my defense, *Thus Was Adonis Murdered* is no ordinary cozy mystery. It's the first of four books featuring a set of young London barristers and their friend Professor Hilary Tamar, the busybody esteemed Oxford don who, over drinks and dinner and gossip, assists in their unintentionally-begotten crime-solving. In this installment, one member of their group, Julia, is accused of murder while traveling abroad, and it's primarily through her letters home that Hilary and the gang analyze the clues in order to prove Julia's innocence and identify the culprit.

One of the book's largest delights, for me, was the very arch, very stylized prose. I'm always on the hunt for Wodehouse-like writing, and Caudwell has a similar style of charmingly funny wordsmithery. The plot was intricate and well-developed. I wouldn't have thought I'd have liked the epistolary angle to the mystery, but it turned out to be another of the book's assets: we get Hilary's first-person POV and the comments of the peanut gallery the rest of Julia's friends in addition to Julia's first-person POV in the letters, and it's a structure that works really well.

From a gender, sex, and sexuality standpoint, this book was refreshingly awesome. Published in 1981, it was awesome about women, about women being awesome in their careers, about women liking sex, about women seeking sex, and about normalizing bisexuality. The last part was particularly awesome, when it was

no big deal for characters to not be assuming binary sexualities in their thought processes, their actions, and their desires. And there was no angst or anger over this bisexuality, either. It was just part and parcel of any average romantic and sexual relationship.

I loved the characters dearly, each of them sharply drawn and recognizable in only a couple brushstrokes of description. Seeing the scatterbrained and passionate Julia through the eyes of her friends, and through her own letters, was pretty much comedy gold. I was nervous to start with that she'd be depicted solely as and objectified as the adorable ditz, but that wasn't a problem at all. Her friends clearly care for her despite her cluelessness frustrating them, and it's also clear what she brings to the group of friends despite being the legendarily ridiculous one in the group. And also, I'd probably happily read chapter upon chapter of Julia describing her plots to bed the object of her affection. As she writes to Selena, the other woman in their group of lawyers:

It is your view, as I understand it, that when dealing with young men one should make no admission, in the early stages, of the true nature of one's objectives but should instead profess a deep admiration for their fine souls and splendid intellects. One is not to be discouraged, if I have understood you correctly, by the fact that they may have neither. I reminded myself, therefore, that if I could get the lovely creature into conversation, I must make no comment on the excellence of his profile and complexion but should apply myself to showing a sympathetic interest in his hopes, dreams and aspirations.

sigaloenta says

One of the most thoroughly delightful murder mysteries I've ever read! Oxford Don solves mysteries on behalf of her former students, now barristers. The majority of the case is conducted from abroad, via letters and the occasional telephone call. The voices are perfect, Hilary Tamar's most of all. I almost knocked a star off for Tragic Gay Passion troping, but in the end I couldn't bring myself to do it-- just be warned that that's a thing.
