



The Wisdom of Father Brown

G.K. Chesterton

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"And the young woman of the house," asked Dr. Hood, with huge and silent amusement, "what does she want?" "Why, she wants to marry him," cried Father Brown, sitting up eagerly. "That is just the awful complication." "It is indeed a hideous enigma," said Dr. Hood. "This young James Todhunter," continued the cleric, "is a very decent man so far as I know; but then nobody knows very much. He is a bright, brownish little fellow, agile like a monkey, clean-shaven like an actor, and obliging like a born courtier. He seems to have quite a pocketful of money, but nobody knows what his trade is. Mrs. MacNab, therefore (being of a pessimistic turn), is quite sure it is something dreadful, and probably connected with dynamite.

The Wisdom of Father Brown Details

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Chuck says

Well, I guess once I start something I have to finish them--this said by someone who has read the Complete Sherlock Holmes more than once. There is a great deal of fun reading a mystery series that you don't know, especially if it is complete (as in anthology of stories published more than 100 years ago). You get to see the development of characters, especially the priest-sleuth Father Brown and his friend, reformed criminal Flambeau. I will say that, while Flambeau seems to grow and change, Brown remains static. It is still fun to watch the way Brown's mind works and the way Chesterton conceives of and executes a short story. Thematic touches are light; except for the fact of the creation of the main character (Brown), a reader might never know Chesterton himself was Catholic. Fun, diverting reading, but nothing in them that can make me say, with any degree of honesty, "you have to read this!"

Sarah83 L says

Nice collection, but not all stories are great

Jam says

The phrases are more flowery than I'm used to, but they're so witty and wonderfully subtle, I can't wait to use some of them myself, in real life even.

The book is an anthology of short stories about Father Brown. Father Brown, I imagine, would fit very well as a spy if he ever chose to change vocations. He's described as utterly ordinary, but also undeniably brilliant. He's a lot like Detective Conan and Sherlock Holmes. He notices the little details and pieces them together. His stories, however, show a difference from the common detective. Perhaps, it's because he's a priest. His clues aren't little pieces of evidence left behind like blood, fingerprints, or remnants of hair in a bowler hat. Instead, he picks up on expressions, twitches, body movements, etc. He deduces conclusions from a man's background, his standing in life, his job, and how his neighbors see him. Of course, it's never anything too complex. Some of the stories in this book are fairly easy to figure out. This book would be perfect on a YA shelf. It's easy enough to read and just enjoy.

Cindy says

"The Wisdom of Father Brown" by G. K. Chesterton. Classic mysteries. Each chapter is a new story. Read by Frederick Brown ©1913 text / audio 1992 Re-readable. Highly recommended.

Free versions available at Librivox and Gutenberg.

Daniel Gill says

Fun, but not so great as "The Innocence"

On the whole I found the first of the Father Brown collections to be more timeless and classic. There are some fun stories in this book, but some of them drag and a few teter on being racist enough to rob me of any enjoyment.

Ian White says

For the most part excellent, particularly The Duel of Dr. Hirsch and The Strange Crime of John Boulnois. The God of Gongs, however, is quite hard to read due to its racism, which may well be typical of its time, but it still made me uncomfortable.

I enjoy the variety of tones, settings and styles Chesterton uses. He conjures up very vivid locales very quickly, and packs a lot in to 20 pages or so. They are hugely atmospheric and have a very odd, hard to describe tone. I also like the way Father Brown often enters each story some way in as a background figure who only comes to the fore towards the end of most of the stories.

Laura says

Page 66:

"I've been reading," said Flambeau, "of this new psychometric method they talk about so much, especially in America. You know what I mean; they put a pulsometer on a man's wrist and judge by how his heart goes at the pronunciation of certain words. What do you think of it?"

"I think it very interesting," replied Father Brown; "it reminds me of that interesting idea in the Dark Ages that blood would flow from a corpse if the murderer touched it."

"Do you really mean," demanded his friend, "that you think the two methods equally valuable?"

"I think them equally valueless," replied Brown. "Blood flows, fast or slow, in dead folk or living, for so many more million reasons than we can ever know. Blood will have to flow very funny; blood will have to flow up the Matterhorn, before I will take it as a sign that I am to shed it."

"The method," remarked the other, "has been guaranteed by some of the greatest American men of science." "What sentimentalists men of science are!" exclaimed Father Brown, "and how much more sentimental must American men of science be! Who but a Yankee would think of proving anything from heart-throbs? Why, they must be as sentimental as a man who thinks a woman is in love with him if she blushes. That's a test from the circulation of the blood, discovered by the immortal Harvey; and a jolly rotten test, too."

This book is not so good as *The Innocence of Father Brown*. Next book to be read will be *The Man Who Was Thursday*

The free e-book can be found at Project Gutenberg.

The free audi version can be also found at Project Gutenberg,

Droid says

Lacks much of the charm, grace and general eloquence of 'The Innocence of Father Brown'. As this somewhat bland collection draws to a conclusion, the slightly insipid taste turns sour when an unexpected explosion of full-frontal racism erupts across the pages, shattering Chesterton's likeable little priest to pieces. Rather a shame.

Amariah Dixon says

(Review to come)

Amy says

I didn't enjoy this one quite as much as The Innocence of Father Brown. I liked The Salad of Colonel Cray.

Batgrl (Book Data Kept Elsewhere) says

I've only read one Father Brown short story before this, and was very much enjoying the others. And then I had to come abruptly into the racism in the story *The God of the Gongs*. If it hadn't been for that story I could have rated this a lot higher, rather than sitting and pondering the casual racism of the time - 1910 for this collection. The one story almost made me want to rate the whole as a one star - but to be fair, that's based on that one story, and how angry it made me. (I've been waffling between two and three stars for this, and it's completely hinging on my reaction to that one story.)

As an aside I should mention that it's not that I'm not used to racism in stories from this time, sadly. In fact I often wonder if, when some schools/parents raise issues about teaching *Huckleberry Finn* if the teachers shouldn't have students read some of the era's stories with overt and casual racism that have characters much less well developed than Jim. As much as I dislike it, I don't think we should refrain from making it clear that these thoughts/attitudes/stereotypes were in a lot of the literature. There are a few authors I still enjoy despite their racism - Lovecraft for instance - but that doesn't mean I don't stop and cringe every time it comes up, even if I expect it. I just can't overlook this, even with the (poor) excuse of "that's the way everyone wrote/thought." When no, not everyone did. So there's the struggle - you can't exactly avoid it, but you - well, I - certainly can't enjoy it.

While several of the other stories have Italian or French characters that are stereotypical, the black characters of *The God of the Gongs* are much, much worse. It's not just the repeated use of the word nigger (or the fact that one character's name is Nigger Ned) - it's the way all the black characters are described.

(72% in) "...He was buttoned and buckled up to his bursting eyeballs in the most brilliant fashion. A tall black hat was tilted on his broad black head - a hat of the sort that the French wit has compared to eight mirrors. But somehow the black man was like the black hat. He also was black, and yet his glossy skin flung back the light at eight angles or more. It is needless to say that he wore white spats and a white slip inside his waistcoat. The red flower stood up in his button hole aggressively, as if it had suddenly grown there. And in the way he carried his cane in one hand and his cigar in the other there was a certain attitude - an attitude we must always remember when we talk of racial prejudices: something innocent and insolent - the cake walk.

"Sometimes," said Flambeau, looking after him, "I'm not surprised that they lynch them." "

If you can't understand why, after reading the quote, there were numerous things there that pissed me off - well, I can't help you. Besides the stereotypes in the description of dress there's the concept that you can wear clothes and walk in a way which supposedly everyone reads as insolent. And the line about lynching - just, no. Sorry, can't deal with the illogic and unfairness of this portrayal.

It doesn't make it any better that Father Brown is given a speech or two which I'm going to assume is supposed to preach tolerance:

(76% in) "...I dare say he has some Italians with him, but our amiable friends are not Italians. They are octofoons and African half-bloods of various shades, but I fear we English think all foreigners are much the same so long as they are dark and dirty. Also," he added, with a smile, "I fear the English decline to draw any fine distinction between the moral character produced by my religion and that which blooms out of Voodoo."

I get the attempted message here - but after the previous quote, plus more I've not quoted, it's not enough. The ugliness of "everyone thinks this way" blots out any message of tolerance. Especially when the end of the story has to do with all blacks in the UK being under suspicion of the law and the public because of the murders by a group. Trying to preach tolerance in this context makes Chesterton seem smug, self-satisfied and completely unaware of how much stronger the stereotypes are than the platitudes.

I enjoy the way Chesterton writes, but I'm not totally sold on the character of Brown (I got tired of the repeated descriptions of how "child-like" he is). Still if anything keeps me from finishing the rest of Chesterton (I have several more ebooks) it will be the bad impressions of this one story. It's going to take me a while to get those images out of my head.

Jane Upshall says

Not his best work . I really did not enjoy this one .

Matthew says

Somehow it is hard to imagine Arthur Conan Doyle writing a book called *The Wisdom of Sherlock Holmes*. Admittedly Dr Watson does call Holmes ‘the best and the wisest man whom I have ever known’, but this is on the occasion of Holmes’ apparent death, and some sentimentality can be forgiven.

For the main part Conan Doyle makes humbler claims about his detective hero. Sherlock Holmes may have a towering intellect, but Conan Doyle makes him a flawed human being. He has vices. His methods are sometimes unethical. Most important of all, he makes serious and even fatal mistakes in his deductions, not all of which can be remedied at the end.

Father Brown by contrast has something of the infallibility of the head of his church, or even of his god. The priest may sometimes be puzzled when the facts have not yet all been presented to him, but his final judgements and his actions are never wrong.

Perhaps that is the reason why we learn almost nothing at all about Father Brown’s personality. We know that he is a priest with an amiable and deceptively insignificant appearance. G K Chesterton tells us that Brown rarely gets to take a holiday, and yet we rarely see him do anything else.

Father Brown is often accompanied by his friend, the thief-turned-detective Flambeau, who is supposedly intelligent but who is always wrong, since Father Brown is the hero. As for Brown’s manner of speaking, it is often in long speeches that employ paradoxes, witticisms and a semi-philosophical style. This might seem more like cleverness than wisdom were it not for the fact that Father Brown is always right.

In this collection of stories, Father Brown solves the mysteries of an unseen thief called Mr Glass, a bandit attack, a man who backs out of a duel, a murderer whose description changes depending on which witness describes him, an escaped convict, a blackmailer with a crooked nose, a man who obstinately refuses to remove his purple wig, a doomed family of aristocrats, a voodoo cult, a man who is cursed while abroad, a man who is killed by a sword, and a crime that took place in the past.

In working out these enigmas, Brown barely falters, and we may well ask why Chesterton is so keen that his hero should be flawless. The reason is not a modest one. It is that Brown is the repository of all of Chesterton’s views of life. So when Father Brown is always right in his investigations, we are supposed to infer that his worldview is similarly unerring.

G K Chesterton’s world is an insular one in which he stands for Catholicism, conservatism and Little England nationalism at a time when the world was moving on. New ideas and new people were coming in from abroad and disrupting the old views. Perhaps they always had been, but in an age where travel, media and communication were improving, the threat may have seemed all that much greater to Chesterton.

Here in the safety of a work of fiction, Chesterton can luxuriate in a world where his hero can make as many sweeping statements, strawman fallacies and anti-rational speeches as he likes, and yet he will be always right, and there will be no intellectual heavyweight to challenge those views. Given how old-fashioned Chesterton’s views are, it is hardly surprising that the murder weapon is more likely to be a sword than a gun in these stories.

Two stories are of especial interest here. One is ‘The Mistake of the Machine’. The title immediately indicates Chesterton’s distrust of science. The machine in question is the lie detector, and Father Brown is

eloquent in his criticism of the new innovation:

““What sentimentalists men of science are!” exclaimed Father Brown, “and how much sentimental must American men of science be! Who but a Yankee would think of proving anything from heart throbs? Why, they must be as sentimental as a man who thinks a woman is in love with him if she blushes.””

It is a neatly worded statement, and it is not entirely untrue. Nowadays it is agreed that measuring someone’s heartbeat via a lie detector is an unreliable way to measure a person’s guilt, and for the reasons Father Brown identifies in the story. There may well be other reasons that cause a person’s heart to beat faster.

Where Brown fails is that he cannot resist making generalisations. The assumptions made by inventors of the lie test were not sentimental, and they were not universally held. Chesterton behaves as if good old instinctive wisdom is worth more than science. It has a place too, but what discredited the lie detector in the end was not intuition but further scientific tests.

Similarly in ‘The Strange Crime of John Boulnois’, Father Brown explains his ability to solve crimes in the following way: “I attach a great deal of importance to vague ideas. All those things that ‘aren’t evidence’ are what convinces me.” This is all very well, but that is not the evidence that proves the innocence or guilt of someone in the real world. Indeed the real deciding factor in this case turns out to be the evidence that Brown is so dismissive about – an alibi, and fingerprints on a sword.

However that was not the second story I was talking about as being of especial interest. For this I would choose ‘The God of the Gongs’. The kindest thing we can say about the story is that it has not aged well. Here the enemy that we are up against involves black immigrants and a murderous voodoo cult.

Once again, Chesterton spends a good deal of time despising that which comes from outside his English and Christian worldview, and the story now seems deeply offensive. It is not just the use of the n-word. While this word was beginning to sound offensive when Joseph Conrad used it in a book title in 1897, it continued to be casually used in respectable society until as late as the 1940s.

No, the real objection has to be with the portrayal of black people in the story. Brown and Flambeau encounter a black man working in a hotel whose manner is insolent to them. Flambeau makes the jawdropping observation, “Sometimes...I’m not surprised that they lynch them.”

Sure enough the threat comes from black members of a voodoo cult, and the story ends with the authorities having a crackdown on black people living in Britain. This is described with no apparent disapproval by Chesterton.

Most of the stories are not as awful as this one however, and Chesterton does a better job of ensuring that his worldview does not intrude into the stories as often as it did in The Innocence of Father Brown. Whatever their flaws, the stories are amusing and clever, and make a good read.

Nicola Mansfield says

Reason for Reading: Next in the series.

This second collection of Fr. Brown lacks the appeal of the first collection. I enjoyed some stories, but found

many to be disappointing in that they were short of being actual mysteries in the sense that I had expected them to be. Sometimes crimes were not really even committed and Fr. Brown was presented with more of a puzzle or conundrum to solve. When there is a crime the story will finish with Brown's solution and the police or any legal justice is hardly called to hand, something I'm finding difficult to get used to with these stories from both volumes so far. These stories are incredibly less religious in nature than the first volume though they all do carry a religious moral ethic as that is the nature of Fr. Brown's sleuthing methods. I was disappointed that Flambeau was rarely seen in this collection as I had come to consider him Brown's sidekick in the first volume but at least the narration has settled it's tone from the first and is written purely in the third person throughout these stories. An acceptable and entertaining read but nowhere near as good as "The Innocence of Father Brown". Chesterton, in real life, had still not converted to Catholicism at the point when these stories were published and I am interested to see if there will be any noticeable difference in the next volume which was published four years after his conversion.

1. The Absence of Mr. Glass - What a fantastic story to start this collection! Not a mystery though by any means, more of a puzzle, a conundrum. Fr. Brown goes to a detective to enlist his services to help determine whether a young man is suitable to marry a young woman known to him. Her mother is dead-set against the marriage as the suitor has a bit of mystery surrounding him, yet everyone else concerned is happy for the young lovers. As the party descends upon young Mr. Todhunter's rooms, they have need to break down the door upon which they find him bound and gagged in the corner. The detective then takes the disarray of the room into account and tells the nefarious doings of the young man and the mystery of one Mr. Glass. When he is finished Fr. Brown laughs and from the clues tells all the truth of what has happened and whether Mr. Todhunter is a suitable suitor or not. Very clever and a delight to read! 5/5
2. The Paradise of Thieves - I don't have a lot to say on this one. I've been busy and couldn't get my mind onto it; whether it was me or the story I can't say for sure. However, it wasn't terribly entertaining and I never had a great sense of what was going on or cared for that matter. It involved a kidnapping. 3/5
3. The Duel of Dr. Hirsch - Another story that didn't quite satisfy, very political. Early on reference is made to another case which I ignored but repeated mention of this case made me google it to see if it was a true crime and indeed it was happening about 20 years prior to the publishing of this book. Perhaps if one were up on these current events at the time the story would have been more enjoyable? However, it wasn't pertinent to the case presented here in its outcome and I was rather disappointed to have figured out the twist before the end. This story does at least bring Flambeau back into the picture. Hoping the next story will be better. 2.5/5
4. The Man in the Passage - Finally, a proper mystery! Fr. Brown is in fine form in this story. He arrives backstage at the Apollo Theatre where the star actress has called him to attend to her. There he finds her in the company of four others: two suitors, her leading man and her male servant. Miss Rome is obviously anxious to speak to Fr. and uses her charms to clear the room. As she sees one man out of the building she is heard walking down the passage to watch his progress down the street then a scream and kerfuffle is heard and the two suitors are heard exclaiming about seeing a man in the passage. Poor Miss Rome is found dead, the leading man is obviously arrested as the killer but it is upon the witness stand that Fr. Brown unravels the simple events of that evening proclaiming whom both the man in the passage and the killer each were. I liked that the killer received their just rewards in this case, even if it was in a round about way. (4/5)
5. The Mistake of the Machine - Well this is a funny tale involving, in a round about way, a wealthy man who holds obscurely themed parties each year. Starting off with a police detective telling Fr. Brown of a murder the previous evening of a warden after a prisoner escaped and his subsequent arrest of the culprit, a shabbily dressed man running across a nearby field. His guilt is all but proven to the detective by the use of

his highly prized "psychometric" machine which measures the variations in one's pulse and thus can tell if a person is under stress and agitated during questioning. Fr. Brown is quite witty with his observations about the machine vs its operator and quite blows apart the detective's story. Though the detective has indeed caught a criminal it is not the one he thinks he has and Fr. Brown solves both the identity of the apprehended man and the true perpetrator of the prison escape and murder of the warden. A clever tale with an ending that surprised me. (4/5)

6. The Head of Caesar - Not quite a proper mystery in the ordinary sense but a crime and a puzzle that Fr. Brown wittily solves again. I really enjoyed this story and it is unique in it's telling. Flambeau is present at the beginning and end but doesn't play a major role. Most of the story takes place in a pub as a woman confesses her entire story to Fr. while the rest plays out at the scene of the crime where Brown wraps up the final pieces. A story of its time but good. (5/5)

7. The Purple Wig - Another fine puzzle mystery though no actual crime is committed again. This time it's more of a moral conundrum and this case takes on the British aristocracy and class system of the early 1900s. A journalist happens upon a table outside a pub finding three men, a doctor, a priest and an otherwise respectable gentleman other than his purplish wig. Here they converse and the topic turns to the old tales and curse of the Dukes of Exmoor. I won't say more but a twist in the middle turns into a double twist at the end for a fun story. Though again, not really a mystery. (4/5)

8. The Perishing of the Pendragons - The last few stories have been following a similar format and this one is no different. Brown and Flambeau are on a small holiday for Brown's health; he is suffering depression. They are taking a river cruise to the Pendragon estates and regaled with the family's legend which includes the mysterious burning tower. Brown just happens to have a hose in hand when the tower really starts to burn and the Father unravels the legend of yore and the current use of the legend. Again not exactly what I consider a mystery (ie no crime to solve) but Fr. does stop a crime from being committed and solve another puzzle. Not as entertaining as others but ok. Finally some good Brown/Flambeau interaction which is sorely lacking in this collection. (3/5)

9. The God of the Gongs - I'm the last person to judge a story based on modern society's views on certain elements such as race and sexism and always view a story from within the time period it was written. However, I could find no redeeming value in this story. To begin with it was a less than entertaining mystery and blatantly racist against the "negro" race. The n-word was used frequently and flippantly. I admit my disgust with the racism and rampant blatant derogatory references made me hurry and get this one over with; I really could not find that it was even trying to be positive within the constraints of the time it was written. In my opinion, this is a racist story even for the time period in which it was written. (0/5)

10. The Salad of Colonel Cray - Finally a genuine mystery and a fun one at that! A burglary takes place and only condiments seem to have been stolen. But when someone is poisoned it is Fr. Brown who happens to have the simple remedy to the rare poison just in the nick of time. (4/5)

11. The Strange Crime of John Boulnois - Rumours of a woman having an affair with a man abound and when he is stabbed and publicly found with his dying breath accuses the scorned husband John Boulnois the crime appears to be fait au complete. However, the priest on hand, Fr. Brown, takes one look around and knows all is not as it appears. Clever tale; the motives are old-fashionably unbelievable but nonetheless a good story. (4/5)

12. The Fairy Tale of Father Brown - For the final tale in this book it is nice to have Flambeau return. But once again this is not really a crime or a mystery as one expects. As in a previous story we are presented with

a mysterious death from the past. Flambeau recounts the details as they were given him by one of the investigating detectives at the time. A prince had been found dead with a bullet in his head and yet there had been no shot fired and only a bullet mark found upon his cravat. After hearing the details of the strange tale, Fr. Brown is able to tell his version of what most likely happened; who the guilty party was and who it wasn't are quite interesting to say the least. A good story to end the volume. (4/5)

Angus Mcfarlane says

Chesterton has often been quoted, and he has a reputation as one of the most insightful Christian thinkers of his generation. As a result, I started reading 'orthodoxy' but found it hard to connect with its vibe. Picking up a father Brown volume as a free ebook, I read it to see if I could get a softer introduction into GKs angle on things. Alas, I didn't really get father brown either. Maybe it worked for a previous generation, but I found the depiction of father brown trite, whilst the stories seemed too contrived - was I supposed to sleuth them out for myself? I didn't find solutions in the text, as only fb had those. certainly the traditional detective approach, where the reader is gradually discovering the truth with the detective, is absent. Apparently, it is the fathers insight into human nature which solves the crime, but this was only apparent for me in the last of the stories. Perhaps another time....

Scilla says

This book is a collection of twelve stories starring the priest, Father Brown and his friend Inspector Flambeau written in the first half of the twentieth century. Father Brown solves things by observation and thought, in some ways like Poirot, but in an unassuming and modest manner. The stories are each very different, but are very good reading.

Lera says

I started off liking these humorous crime tales, very accessible despite their antiquity. But the stories became less entertaining, the more of them that I read. As more horrific racial stereotypes (surely "of their time, but no more repulsive for that) were introduced, I found myself skipping whole pages in an effort to escape. Not the best sign. I'm fairly sure I've heard some of these serialised on the radio, and for me that's probably a better medium - idly listening to the better ones, whilst getting on with something else.

Charlotte says

This is effectively a collection of short detective novels each with a crime or mystery and often Father Brown just happens to be in the right place at the right time: an element which sadly has a ring of implausibility about it.

The Father Brown stories are often compared to the Sherlock Holmes stories and yet, although they are both amateur detectives there are many differences. While Holmes uses inductive logic (although allegedly

deducing the solution), Brown focuses on emotions and human behaviour. There is also a strong focus on morals, which is unsurprising given the nature of his vocation: that of a catholic priest (also the faith of the author).

These stories are ideal for reading individually, but their often bizarre nature would make them difficult to read as a novel.

Gheeta says

To be honest I was a little disappointed. I've heard so many good things about Chesterton's writings that I guess I just expected more. There is no unifying story line in this book, just a compilation of many tales where the inimitable Father Brown shows up and subsequently solves the problem. I guess I was expecting more character development...or simply something more.

Tim Smith says

You can read my review at <http://world-of-sleuths.blogspot.com/....>
