



The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club

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90-year-old General Fentiman was definitely dead, but no one knew exactly when he had died -- and the time of death was the determining factor in a half-million-pound inheritance. Lord Peter Wimsey would need every bit of his amazing skills to unravel the mysteries of why the General's lapel was without a red poppy on Armistice Day, how the club's telephone was fixed without a repairman, and, most puzzling of all, why the great man's knee swung freely when the rest of him was stiff with rigor mortis.

The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club Details

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From Reader Review The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club for online ebook

Lightreads says

On the surface, a pleasant puzzle-piece little murder mystery, with Peter bounding here and there, declaiming and detecting his way to an answer. But under that . . . yikes. What an uncomfortable book, with people turning and twisting and snagging on each other like brambles on silk. Everyone stuck inside a little box called *marriage* or *poverty* or *shell shock* or *police rules*. This book is all tight spaces – the badly lit veteran’s club, the body crammed up tight in the phone box, the stifling social scene. There’s something bitter and angry down deep here, something peculiarly postwar and female and *stuck* in a way I can’t put my finger more precisely on.

And then the little cut of the title, because of course we wouldn’t want anything *unpleasant* to happen, no no, particularly not to the soldiers who made it home alive, the lucky ones who are clearly and absolutely fine now.

Eek.

Nikki says

Featuring Ian Carmichael as Lord Peter Wimsey, Peter Jones as Bunter, and Gabriel Woolf as Inspector Parker

This has never been my favourite of the books, though it does touch on some of the horrors of war (in the figure of George Fentiman) and there are some interesting moral issues — particularly because this is one of those books in which Peter chooses to offer someone a “gentlemanly way out”. On the one hand, it bothers me because the guy is basically painted into a corner: his guilt has been figured out, and now here comes Lord Peter to make him write a full confession and then gently hint that he should shoot himself, rather than face due process and be condemned by a jury. Of course, the death penalty is probably his ultimate destination, and yet... who is Lord Peter to decide? To offer a way round the law?

It’s one of those stories in which Peter is asked whether he’s a detective or a gentleman, and he pretty much dodges the issue.

The radioplay is a fun enough adaptation, though the pacing is bizarre. Just as you think it must be approaching the denouement, it turns out that no, there’s still half the story to go. It feels very odd, even when you know it’s coming.

As usual, the voice acting is pretty excellent, and there was no desperate overacting by extras in this one, either. Hurrah.

Originally posted here.

Jaline says

This is the fifth Dorothy Sayers novel I have read in her Lord Peter Wimsey series, and I continue to enjoy her writing, and Lord Peter's character development. There is even an updated biography (by Lord Peter's uncle) at the back of the book so we can continue to fill in the gaps of his life as the author herself discovers more about him.

The plots are growing more refined over time with lots of red herrings – and I especially like the ones that Lord Peter tosses immediately back into the sea. His intuition continues to develop – even when some of the suspects have lines of evidence with arrows at the end pointing right at them, Lord Peter finds cracks in those lines and shows how they were bent to point in the wrong direction.

These are not fast-paced, heart-racing novels by any means. In the classic style, they are superbly plotted, skillfully written, old-fashioned whodunnits – and I continue to look forward to each one!

? Irena ? says

3.5

I can't help but be amused by that understatement in the title. I love it.

A Crimean War veteran, General Fentiman, died in his chair at the Bellona Club. Lord Peter Wimsey is there too. Since the general was very old, nobody asks any questions. Well, not until they realize it is very important to know the exact time of the general's death because of a surprising inheritance.

Next thing you know, any other weird things pile up and Lord Wimsey is asked to find out the exact time of the man's death. It isn't as easy as it sounds though.

I can't say too much about the plot nor about the things I liked (so as not to spoil it). There are certain social issues pointed out regarding war veterans, women and their rights, desires and opportunities and so on. None of this is in your face. You have to work for it - a sentence here, a remark there.

This book never leaves the protagonist the way the third book, *Unnatural Death*, did (one of the reasons I disliked it so much). There are a couple of surprises too. You may think where the author is leading us, but I wouldn't count on it.

Lord Peter Wimsey is one of my favourite amateur investigators.

Jane says

Where I got the book: my bookshelf. A re-read.

I have grown to love this Lord Peter Wimsey mystery because of its somberness, although I remember that when I first read it as a teen I found it uninteresting. Amazing how history (and, therefore, literature) becomes more complex and interesting as you age. The mystery LPW is called on to investigate is the time

of death of ancient, dodderly General Fentiman, which will make a big financial difference to one or more of three potential heirs. Of course things turn out to be way more complicated than the natural death of a very old soldier...

This novel is set against the background of the aftermath of World War I, hence its more realistic, sober tone than the earlier novels. LPW comes very well out of this book, with far fewer fantastic speeches or superhuman feats of everything than some of the Wimsey novels are prone to. I feel, though, that the writing's a little rougher than usual, as if Sayers were on a short deadline.

Another thing that struck me this time round (and I may be completely wrong) is that Ann Dorland, one of the heirs and thus a potential suspect, was a prototype of Harriet Vane, who will turn up in the next novel as LPW's love interest. Ann is an unhappy woman because she's been crossed in love, is a murder suspect but underneath it all (as LPW tells her) is a fine person with good taste. Does that sound familiar, Wimsey fans? Can't help thinking that at some point Sayers thought "hey, there's a little spark there. I could develop it for the next novel".

A good mystery, of course: Sayers is nothing if not ingenious (although this is two times in quick succession that the victim has been an elderly person who would soon die anyway...) But it's the brooding, foggy feel of the book that really gives it its worth. Even Parker (inside whose head we dwell rather disconcertingly at times) seems to be permanently depressed, and the end of the book sort of drifts off into the mist. One to read by a cheerful log fire with a glass of old brandy...

Cindy Rollins says

This is the book where Sayers starts to hit her stride with Lord Peter. He is suddenly beginning to look like a fully fleshed out man, perceptive, subtly hard-edged, sometimes silly, and thoroughly likable. The mystery gives us a chance to see him puzzle out two different puzzles while watching him measure up people. I like how Sayers throws social commentary around artfully. She never preaches, but I always find myself nodding along, wondering why I didn't think of that. The reason I didn't is that I am not the inimitable Dorothy Sayers. What a class of writers those Oxford Christians were!

Nikki says

A reread, of course. Not the best of the Wimsey books, but full of Sayers' usual brains and wit. There's some excellent character interactions — especially one between Lord Peter and Parker, where Peter is somewhat resenting the fact that he's working with the police and potentially having to betray friends. There's some great quotes, like Peter saying that books are kind of like shells that we discard when we grow out of them, but which lie around as a record of people we used to be. Yes!

This is one of the not-really-high-stakes mysteries, though; the death was of an old man, and was somewhat predictable, and the person who killed him didn't try to cover his tracks by attacking other people. It becomes more of an intellectual puzzle, though there are some good bits about the feelings of particular characters. I don't want to say too much in case anyone's interested in reading this and forming their own opinions about the murder, so I'll stop there! A solid mystery, but not the most emotionally involving of the Wimsey books, nor the cleverest.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Jan C says

This was a re-read. Not sure how many times. I couldn't locate my copy so I had to get it from the library. When all else fails, try the library.

I remembered some of it. But definitely not the culprit.

It does involve some degree of what we now call PTSD, but was then called shell shocked, since almost everyone is a veteran of WWI. One of the suspects has a fair amount of trouble with it, can't earn a proper living for himself and has to live off his wife, which kind of compounds his problems. And there is interior discussion for Wimsey, remembering when he had to check in somewhere to chill out.

As this book came out in 1928 this is something that would have spoken to the audience then. They were all getting over the war then. And the book begins on Armistice or Remembrance Day, so nerves would already have been on edge.

I haven't read any of the Wimsey stories for a while and so had forgotten how much I enjoyed them.

11/29/16 - another re-read. Very enjoyable.

Olga Godim says

3.5 stars

There is a question in my mind regarding this book. It is listed as #5 in Sayers's famous detective series about Peter Wimsey, an amateur sleuth. But my copy of the book states its year of publication as 1921, which would make it #1 in the series. The quality of this novel seems to support such assessment – it's not very high. Nonetheless, it's a solid mystery novel and it raises some interesting moral questions.

In the beginning of this novel, Peter is asked not to investigate a crime but to ascertain the exact time of death of an old member of the Bellona Club. The man was ninety and seemed to die peacefully in his sleep in his favorite chair at the Club. His elderly sister died at approximately the same time, but depending on who pre-deceased whom, a huge amount of money in the sister's will would go to different heirs.

Peter starts the investigation, but it takes him to unexpected places. A crime has been committed after all, but what crime, who did it, and why? As the investigation proceeds, Peter is forced to suspect people he would rather not find guilty, including his army buddy George. Torn between his need to discover the truth and his compassion, he even gets into a spat with his friend, the police detective Parker.

In the end, Peter is much more concerned about establishing who is innocent and protecting them than finding who is guilty. Peter's advice to the guilty party is not what we would consider wise or even decent, although it might've complied with the notion of honor that was an atavism from a hundred years before. Altogether, a disappointing denouement.

The characterization in this novel is also not the best. Peter talks a lot, but his thought process is not always open to the reader, and the author never describes her hero at all. If you read this novel before reading any other in the series, you wouldn't know how Peter looks or what his family is like. The other characters are also pretty sketchy, and the timing of the novel is vague, although it's obviously happening sometime after the WWI. The entire tale seems more like a chapter in Peter's life than an independent book. I guess it's not #1 in the series after all, but then why does it list the year of publication the earliest of all other Peter

Wimsey novels? Is it a typo, I wonder?

I read all Peter Wimsey novels years ago and loved Peter then. I also liked the author's approach to a mystery story. It's all about an intelligent detective. Peter doesn't shoot guns or engage in car chases. He asks questions and looks for clues, chats with everyone and applies logic and psychology to his solutions. He doesn't subject himself to unnecessary danger or tumble into stupid escapades. The suspense is cerebral rather than physical, a treat for the brain. It's my favorite type of a mystery story and it's extremely rare nowadays. So I decided to reread the whole series. Perhaps I started with the wrong book. I enjoyed the mystery nevertheless, but Peter still eludes me. On to the next book.

Susan says

Published in 1928 this Lord Peter Wimsey mystery is set around Remembrance Day. When Wimsey arrives at the Bellona Club he meets up with his friend, George Fentiman, who is a victim of poison gas and shell shock during the war. He admits to Lord Peter that he is struggling financially and is upset that he is dependent upon his wife Sheila going out to work. This novel sees Lord Peter Wimsey, and author Dorothy L. Sayers, in a much more reflective mood. There is an obvious distance between the generations – as George Fentiman struggles with the post-war world, both his brother Robert and his grandfather, General Fentiman, see the war as something to be celebrated and the elderly General perceives George's problems as weakness.

When the elderly general is found dead in his armchair at the club, there is an attempt to contact his estranged sister, Lady Dormer. However, it is discovered that, not only had she also died, but the two met on Lady Dormer's deathbed only the evening before. Solicitor Mr Murbles asks Lord Peter to investigate which of them died first; as the terms of Lady Dormer's will mean that if she died first, Robert and George Fentiman will inherit a fortune. However, if General Fentiman died first, the money will go to Ann Dorland, a distant relative of Lady Dormer, who acted as her companion.

Of course, what begins as a simple investigation to discover the time of General Fentiman's death becomes a much more involved and complicated affair. There are mysterious sightings of someone who may be able to clarify the matter, chases across the Continent, wonderful detours into some of the popular fads of the period, and even an exhumation, before Lord Peter, along with his detective-inspector friend Charles Parker, discover the truth.

This is a well plotted and interesting novel – clearly showing how the WWI veterans are viewed by the older generation and highlighting the staid, unsympathetic opinions of the elderly, ex-military members who make up the majority of the gentleman's club. They are a generation separated by a new kind of warfare and perfectly capture the truth that the generation gap is by no means a new experience. I love Dorothy L. Sayers novels and Lord Peter Wimsey is one of my favourite fictional sleuths. This is a wonderful glimpse into a vanished world, as well as a fascinating mystery.

Sandy *The world could end while I was reading and I would never notice* says

This is quite the best Lord Peter Wimsey novel I have read thus far.

Lord Peter's personality is beginning to flower - he really is quite a sweetie with a kind heart, a man who likes to see people happy. He even gets to play matchmaker. I love the way his mind works, and he has quite a theatrical bent.

Lord Peter had been joking about how a body could sit in its chair in the club undetected, when one is discovered. Everyone had thought the elderly General Fendman was merely snoozing by the fire. But when it becomes imperative to ascertain the exact time of the General's death to determine the recipient of a half-million pound inheritance, Lord Peter will need to employ all his skills and those of his butler Bunter and good friend Inspector Charles Parker.

This is a true classic and one I enjoyed immensely.

Tara says

Honestly, I've been reading all these Dorothy Sayers books in secret recently, but I can't hide it anymore. I have rigorously avoided mystery novels because my mother refuses to read any book that is not Jane Austen or a mystery penned by a woman. It's a family joke. We get her things outside the box: not interested. It's female flowering dogwoods, power-saws so she can do more home repair, and mystery novels by women. As a young reader I said: I will read theology, history, philosophy; I will not be pigeon-holed, so I'd better shy away from mysteries in case there's a genetic predisposition or something.

And now I've succumbed. I love Sayers. Like Tolkien, I draw the line at Harriet Vane, and yes "Wimsey" is so precious a name for a character that I feel mildly ill. Regardless of some of the adorableness, she's really a very fine writer. Her prose is marvelous and hilarious and each of the novels are distinct. Not just in plot, but in tone: from the ringing of the bells to the rapid-fire witticisms, each story seems to pull back a curtain and reveal a new aspect of Sayers. It was here, in *The Unpleasantness* that pity and love for ordinary messy human beings shined through. She's funny! And sort of sad! And Wimsey is an imperfect but lovable person, and damn all his detective brilliance! Sympathetic bad artists! Charming ancient assholes! Working women! I understand now. This is why my mom is so into re-reading the same mystery novels. Here is something I wanted to curl up with at night with a glass of port (and I've never had port) and yet moved me. Like an old friend with a murderous problem that I can watch with affection. I don't even know what I'm talking about now: I'm rendered inarticulate because I just want to finish up and rush back to bed with another Wimsey. Oh! Me! Dorothy! Ha!

Jeanette says

Engaging and SO, SO English of this period. It's the men's club and there's an elder's death. But when did he die. It's pivotal to an inheritance to prove exactly when. Minutes may count as fortune. He was seated there for hours!

This was one of the few I read back in the day. It's just as good now. And so very, very Lord Peter Wimsey in language. Some of the conversations have the cadence of a two or three sided octave refrain chorus plus

an accompanied dance.

It displays Sayers in her most discerning mood to nuance of that changing time after a type of war that never was before. Incredible that she grasped so many men's cognition and feeling for "then". It's a glimpse into a world that no longer exists too.

Nikki says

It's fortunate for me that these books are so familiar to me by now, because I got distracted by other books in the middle of this. It's not my favourite of the bunch, which helps to explain why; I do like the conflicts between Parker and Peter that're brought out by the nature of the story, the awkwardness between them as Peter has to suspect one of his own friends. That's perhaps the best part of this: the characterisations of those two as they try to balance friendship and duty; Peter's struggle with himself and his own honesty.

The ending is one of those awfully convenient, gentlemanly ones where Peter could bring the person to trial, etc, etc, and then warns them and offers them suicide instead. I can never quite decide what I think about those endings: they give Peter a kind of out, so that he doesn't have to do the ungentlemanly thing. Which is a bit unfair, really.

James says

Another enjoyable entry in the Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries canon. This time, with no murder to solve, Wimsey is called in to assist with a slight problem at his club: The Bellona Club. An elderly member of the club, General Fentiman has died in the club, and while the circumstances aren't suspicious, there is a problem. His estranged sister died the same day – the very same morning – and the terms of her will are dependent on which of them expired first. If Lady Dormer went first then the money passes, however briefly, to General Fentiman and then to his next-of-kin. Otherwise they get very little. However, there is some confusion over exactly when General Fentiman died as nobody really noticed. He was just sitting there in the club having a snooze...

Wimsey is brought in by the Fentiman's – fellow club members and all that – to help clear the confusion up, and keep the club from any more 'unpleasantness'. Nobody will listen to his suggestion to forget about it all and just split the inheritance between the two sides, nor to his warnings that once he starts his investigation it's likely to be unpleasantness for all sides, and once he starts it's proper detective fiction with suspects and twists all over the place. Before you know it, you're doubting it's even a natural death and wondering who's trying to cheat who out of their inheritance.

The Wimsey and Bunter dialogue is good, but not really the top-drawer stuff that we love. Instead Wimsey and, an artist friend, Marjorie Phelps have all the best lines: discussing going out to racy plays and arguing over the ethics and merits of spying on friends. Both of them have biases that they're trying to be objective about – Wimsey obviously sympathises with his friend Fentiman who has PTSD and Marjorie sympathises with her friend, Ann Dorland, one of the top suspects – both pretty unsuccessfully. The only real problem with this book, was that early on there's a long explanation of the Fentiman tree. There just seemed to be too many of them and I was confused. After a while I cottoned on that it was a much smaller group of Fentimans, but sometimes they were referred to by name and sometimes by rank – threw me off balance a bit at the start, and meant I was struggling to keep track of more suspects than I really needed to.

Hayden says

The fact that roughly 90% of my assigned reading material this semester is stuff I would be reading for pleasure anyway is truly a wonderful occurrence.

Siria says

As a crime novel, it's not bad; compared to her earlier works, it's a definite improvement in terms of the tightness and plausibility of her plotting. Not the best crime novel you're ever going to read, and lightweight compared to the later books, but it still has a nice few twists and turns in it along the way.

Of course, this being a DLS novel, I'm not actually reading it for the murder mystery. The book's introduction describes Sayers' work is very much a 'tapestry novel', and I'd have to agree. Even if you were to take away the slang and the descriptions of the clothing and so on, this would still, inescapably, be a novel set in England in 1928. It's bound up and connected with the culture and the society and the mores of post-Great War Britain.

Some of this is still accessible for us at the beginning of the twenty-first century; other parts of it, not so much. I'm thinking primarily of the class issue (both the mere fact that for the people Sayers was mostly concerned with, having valets and butlers and maids still wasn't unusual, and other reasons); of the consequences of something so earth-shattering as WWI; and of the (changing) role of women within the novel (Though I suppose you could put up a damn convincing argument as to why that latter aspect really hasn't changed much at all.)

The relationship between Sheila and George Fentiman is painful to read about, truly painful; all the more so because I think it's fairly clear that they are still in love despite it all. They are a prime example of effect which the war and rising employment among married, middle-class women had on gender relations. Sheila has no choice but to work; for George, this is a reflection on him as a man, and somehow a violation of how things ought to be (again, perhaps, not so different nowadays).

We're constantly reminded of how much the war has changed everything; women can no longer afford to stay at home, nor are they content to stay in the roles which they were once expected to occupy (hence some decidedly snide remarks about 'modern' young women who 'jazz', and about lady companions). Their roles have shifted to encompass more than ever before; but there is a feeling both that this is not appropriate (as in the case of George's opinion) and that it hasn't been earned (see Robert's "I bet she never did anything in the Great War, Daddy" when talking about Ann Dorland's inheritance. The figures of women like Naomi and Ann symbolise the huge loss of life in the war, something which made it impossible for many women to even think of finding a husband; and, more disturbingly, they also show how much suspicion single women were regarded with at the time. See the constant references to sex mania, or the threat thereof, being applied to figures like Anne.

Then there are the more straightforward references to the war and Peter's (oh, Peter) reaction to it; the yearly dinner with Colonel Marchbanks; the crippled cloakroom attendant. Even when talking about Robert, the brother who supposedly came out of the war best, we are told that:

"Robert was proverbial, you know, for never turning a hair. I remember Robert, at that ghastly hole at

Carency, where the whole ground was rotten with corpses--ugh!--potting those swollen great rats for a penny a time, and laughing at them. Rats. Alive and putrid with what they'd been feeding on. Oh, yes, Robert was thought a damn good soldier."

Try telling me that we don't know from that part onwards that Robert's been more than a little damaged by the war - let alone when we realise how he's willing to manipulate his grandfather's death for financial gain.

All these young men trapped in a world they helped to create, unable to cope with it--they've suffered so much, and yet they're being castigated for it by their elders, the old military gentlemen of the Bellona Club, who are unable to comprehend what they've been through. Such a sad novel.

Lynne King says

Dorothy Sayers, in my opinion, is one of the major novelists from the golden age of detective authors in the 1920s and 1930s in the US but the best author has to be John Dickson Carr. His "Devil in Velvet" (time travel book regarding a pact with the devil) was sublime as were all of his other books, I believe that there were more than eighty, although the latter ones, in my opinion, were not so good.

Still Dorothy Sayers definitely deserves her place in history.

Ken Moten says

Very convenient time for me to review my first novel by Dorothy Sayers. During [US] Womens History Month and on International Womens Day.

While this is not my first mystery story I ever read it is the first mystery novel. I had read some Sherlock Holmes stories in school and I have read the Poe detective stories (which I am procrastinating on reviewing at the moment) but never a detective story in novel form. I have to say that I don't think I could have found a more interesting character than this.

Lord Peter Wimsey is a...Lord (I'm guessing hereditary peer) and WWI veteran who takes up solving crimes for a living. Not usually what early 20th century nobles did but he seems to have a knack for it. He's well aware of literary characters like Holmes and he has no trouble referencing them. But what makes Lord Peter stand apart to me is that he is more likable and cooler without seeming too obnoxious.

My trouble with mystery stories is that they always struggle to grab my attention for long. I have tried again and again to read *The Hound of the Baskervilles* but have never made it past the third or fourth chapter. Here it is something different it is a setting that is aware but not overly smug. There is a humor and emotional depth to Peter Wimsey and his allies...

That is another thing that I like. Unlike in other detective stories, the main protagonist isn't the only character that is allowed to be right or competent or even semi-literate and that really pleased me. I get tired of an author trying to show that their pet character is so great by making all the side characters and friends of the [main] character functionally retarded. Sayers takes great pain not to do that and this adds a realism to the characters and a humanity to the plot [and author]. Many of the co-protagonists, but especially Charles Parker the inspector-general, are actually really good at their job and accomplish a lot in helping solve the mystery. They might not always be 100% right (and this case they're not) but they are respectable characters.

Now of course what makes Lord Peter Wimsey the main protagonist is that he is ALWAYS two moves ahead of everyone else in the story. At times it feels like even the narrator is trying to catch up with him and it makes for good reading as you are trying to guess ahead of the protagonists only to find out that Lord Peter is still ahead of you. This is a testament to how well Sayers wrote him and the story and when you see how well Wimsey can pull off a gambit it puts you head first in the story.

Well this is the first but not last Peter Wimsey I will be reading as I have been told that from here it really takes off into some Sayers' best mystery writing.

Kelly says

I should disclaim that I listened to the BBC radio dramatization of this on my commutes rather than read it. (For those thinking about doing the same: Each of the stories in the collection is around about three hours to listen to, so time your own commute out accordingly.)

And really, the story is pretty perfect for the medium. Sayers' stories are generally heavy on talk anyway, and the very few action scenes that are required are amply taken care of by someone banging on the walls, creaking a door or producing a gunshot in the distance. Ian Carmichael's voice and cheeri-frightfully-ho-and-all-that* attack at the dialogue is very much perfection, though I almost wish he went farther with it for maximum judge-me-at-your-peril effect. The story itself was compelling in that while I guessed who was guilty relatively early on, I did *not* guess who was innocent, and that was a lovely surprise. I also appreciate that Sayers found a way to structure her story so as to use it as a reminder of an ongoing issue at the time: Men living with cases of shell-shock years and years after the Great War. Listening to the way it was handled by the gruff, privileged Englishmen who populate this story was actually unexpectedly affecting.

The next in the collection is Strong Poison, and I'm very curious to see if I like it any better in radio version than I did in print.

*an excellently self-explanatory bit of throwaway of Sayers' that I will now use as a characterization tool forever, by the way, to introduce men of a certain type.
