



# The Golden Age of Murder

*Martin Edwards*

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## **The Golden Age of Murder** Martin Edwards

A real-life detective story, investigating how Agatha Christie and colleagues in a mysterious literary club transformed crime fiction, writing books casting new light on unsolved murders whilst hiding clues to their authors' darkest secrets. Now an Edgar Award Nominee!

This is the first book about the Detection Club, the world's most famous and most mysterious social network of crime writers. Drawing on years of in-depth research, it reveals the astonishing story of how members such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers reinvented detective fiction.

Detective stories from the so-called "Golden Age" between the wars are often dismissed as cosily conventional. Nothing could be further from the truth: some explore forensic pathology and shocking serial murders, others delve into police brutality and miscarriages of justice; occasionally the innocent are hanged, or murderers get away scot-free. Their authors faced up to the Slump and the rise of Hitler during years of economic misery and political upheaval, and wrote books agonising over guilt and innocence, good and evil, and explored whether killing a fellow human being was ever justified. Though the stories included no graphic sex scenes, sexual passions of all kinds seethed just beneath the surface.

Attracting feminists, gay and lesbian writers, Socialists and Marxist sympathisers, the Detection Club authors were young, ambitious and at the cutting edge of popular culture – some had sex lives as bizarre as their mystery plots. Fascinated by real life crimes, they cracked unsolved cases and threw down challenges to Scotland Yard, using their fiction to take revenge on people who hurt them, to conduct covert relationships, and even as an outlet for homicidal fantasy. Their books anticipated not only CSI, Jack Reacher and Gone Girl, but also Lord of the Flies. The Club occupies a unique place in Britain's cultural history, and its influence on storytelling in fiction, film and television throughout the world continues to this day.

The Golden Age of Murder rewrites the story of crime fiction with unique authority, transforming our understanding of detective stories and the brilliant but tormented men and women who wrote them.

## **The Golden Age of Murder Details**

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## From Reader Review The Golden Age of Murder for online ebook

### Damaskcat says

As a long time fan of many of the writers of so-called Golden Age crime fiction I was keen to read this history of the Detection Club and its authors. This is a comprehensive history of how the Detection Club came to be formed by Dorothy L Sayers, Anthony Berkeley and Agatha Christie. It also examines their lives and work and discusses some interesting insights into their well concealed private lives.

The book sets the origins of the club firmly in the period between the two World Wars and examines the cultural and historical background of the times. Many critics of Golden Age crime fiction, both contemporary and modern, refer to the way the books do not dwell on misery or violence. But this book makes clear that the reading public wanted escapism having had a surfeit of violence during World War I. The Golden Age authors knew what their public wanted and strove to provide it.

The authors were also writing under the constraints of the times in which they lived where explicit sex in novels was just not allowed and graphic violence was almost equally taboo. In fact the seeds of modern psychological crime novels were sown at this time and later authors have used similar plots in modern novels of suspense.

I found it interesting to read how authors were influenced by the real crimes both of their era and earlier periods and how they were often incredibly knowledgeable about true crime as well. I had heard of many of the authors discussed in the text and will be reading more of their work in the near future.

I thought it was interesting that many of the authors mentioned in this book seem to have had problems with income tax at one time or another. Having recently read two biographies of Georgette Heyer, who encountered similar problems, this seems to be a common theme with authors of the period.

If you want to know more about the Golden Age authors, or even if you just enjoy reading their books you will find this book of absorbing interest. Be warned, it could seriously damage your bank balance as you will come across many authors whose books you just must read! There is a bibliography and an index included in the book as well and an appendix showing the rules and constitution of the Detection Club.

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### Dave says

The best book about classic mysteries I've ever read. Edwards has a lot of narrative skill, a playful nature, a gently skeptical attitude, and no sense of propriety. I guess it helps that all of these writers are dead, but it seemed at first as if the book was going to be *Oxford Babylon*, what with the affairs, disappearances, alcoholism, sexual secrets, bastard children and whatnot. But his point is really that these writers lived in the real world and had to deal with it, and that it's ignorant to characterize them all as effete snobs who don't know how the mean streets work. Raymond Chandler really had no idea what he was talking about.

Edwards focuses most on three of the best writers of the age - Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, and Anthony Berkeley/Francis Iles, all of whom were key to the formation and development of the Detection Club. What could have been a dry history of a silly social club is deftly interspersed with the stories of these three writers, capsule histories of the life and work of many others, some of the true crimes that inspired the

fiction, and an examination of life in England between the wars. Edwards really knows the genre, and he knows what's been written about the genre, and he knows what people might like to read nowadays. He has a gift for pithy phrases: "His detective stories were now as convoluted as his sex life, but more successful." "Sayers loathed being labeled a feminist, but that is what she was." He also has some respectful but lacerating things to say about Julian Symons, who I've always thought was a twit. Though Edwards disagrees with Symons frequently, he almost makes me want to go back and read him, now that I know he won't have the last word.

My only regret is that it wasn't longer, and only mentions postwar writers like Christianna Brand, Edmund Crispin, and Cyril Hare in passing. But I've got a long list of books to hunt down, and a great reference book for rereading some day.

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## Jane says

I've been reading crime fiction from the 'Golden Age' for a long, long time. I began with Agatha Christie, who was always my mother's favourite; I moved on to Ngaio Marsh, on the recommendation of a librarian; I borrowed a book by Dorothy L Sayers from my godmother and was quickly smitten; I discovered Margery Allingham when the BBC dramatized her work. Over the years I discovered more wonderful writers: Michael Innes, Josephine Tey and Anthony Berkeley and the first name to come to mind, but I know that there are others I've read and others I have still to read.

That made Martin Edwards' books – its full title 'The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story' – a quite wonderful proposition. I thought that I could have a lovely time learning more about books and authors I knew and loved, remembering books and authors who had slipped my mind, and, of course, and discovering new authors and finding more books that I might read.

I did all of that, and a great deal more,

This is the story of the writers who formed the Detection Club, in between the wars. It was an age when Britain was recovering from the horrors of the First World War; when austerity and unemployment would lead to the General Strike, while the rich grew richer and more decadent than ever before; when the British Empire was beginning its inevitable decline; and when some saw – and some didn't see – a new threat emerging in Germany.

All of that history is reflected in the lives of the writers and in their writings.

The Detection Club grew out of the dinners Anthony Berkeley and his wife Peggy hosted at their home in the late 1920s; their guests included Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers, Douglas and Margaret Cole, Ronald Knox, Henry Wade, H C Bailey and John Rhode. Eventually a club was formed, with rules, a constitution and a committee, and with the stated aim of encouraging and maintaining a high standards in the writing of detective novels

It allowed crime writers to meet, to talk over ideas, to support one another each other, and to collaborate on a number of books.

The book opens dramatically, as Ngaio Marsh is a guest at a ritual dinner to install a new club president. Present are 'Eric the Skull' and a host of crime writers including the founding members whose stories Martin Edwards will use to provide a framework for all of the stories he has to tell: Dorothy L Sayers, Anthony Berkeley and Agatha Christie.

There really is a wealth of information in this book.

The stories of the writers I've mentioned and many more are told well; with insight that allowed me to understand them as people and to understand why they wrote what they wrote in the way and at the time they did, and with understanding and restraint so that I never felt that I was intruding. They were people with very different lives and concerns, but the Detection Club made them a community, and I came to understand that they were also people who loved and appreciated the art of the crime writer every bit as much as their most enthusiastic readers.

I was intrigued by the number of real crimes than underpinned the fiction of the period. There were cases I knew – most famously Doctor Crippen and Thompson and Bywaters – but there were many I didn't; some were solved but some were not; some were of the period and some were from the past. The cases were discussed, and there were instance of crime writers turning detective to try to solve some of the unsolved mysteries.

The discussion of specific titles told me that the author had a wonderful depth of knowledge of subject; and he made me want to read any number of books again in the light of what I had learned as well as reading many others for the first time. I was fascinated as I learned how the authors used their books to refer to each other, and so many interesting details that I really don't know where to start.

I was particularly interested to see the connections between people – some club members and some not – and I spotted many names I wouldn't have associated with the crime fiction of the period, who were friends, relatives or descendants of the main protagonists.

The narrative was moving slowly and steadily through time, but I was so caught up with everything in this book, with the interplay of true crime, social history, lives lived and crime fictions, and with the wealth of wonderful detail, that I hardly noticed. That speaks volumes for the author's depth of knowledge, for his love of his subject, and for the craftsmanship he deployed in the building of this extraordinary book.

It isn't quite a comprehensive account of the Golden Age, because there were key writers who weren't involved with the Detection Club, or who became members later, of who remained on the fringes. I have to mention that, but I also have say that it really doesn't detract from the quality of the work.

My interest dipped just a little towards the end as many of the people I had been reading about had aged, passed the peak of their writing careers, or had left this life. But it was piqued again when the author returned to the relationship between two writers, one remembered – though not as well as he might be – as a crime writer, and the other remembered for quite different reasons.

This is the one specific I am going to mention, and it would have been worth the price of admission on its own. Anthony Berkeley and E M Delafield had a long and very close relationship, each influenced the other's writing, and there are nods one to the other in many of their books.

That added a more books to the very long list that I so want to read and find.

I'll also read this book again. I'll look things up and I'm sure I'll read it again from cover to cover.

I'd call it essential for lovers of the subject; and well worth reading for anyone with any interest at all.

## Kris - My Novelesque Life says

*Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?*

Last week I introduced Patricia Wentworth's series, Miss Silver Mysteries which were written from late 1920s to the early 1960s. This time period has been called "The Golden Age of Murder". The era where the mystery genre really gets its identity and popularity. It is in this time that a group of mystery writers formed a society called the Detection Club. This club was meant for mystery writers to converse with others from the same genre. The Honourary President was Arthur Conan Doyle with G.K. Chesterton as President and members such as Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie and Anthony Berkley. This group of authors are often given the term of cozy mysteries as many people perceive them to be cute little mystery stories. Yet, Martin Edwards, and I agree, puts forth that it was these authors that actually formed what a "mystery novel" is and also brought forth the popularity of mystery.

### THE GOLDEN AGE OF MURDER

Written by Martin Edwards

2015, 528 Pages

Genre: nonfiction, mystery, biography, literary

RATING: ★★★★★

Many detectives in books today have roots from this time. Yes, the characters and the science have evolved along with twists and gore, but the core of the story is still the same. No matter how you dress up a book a mystery fan will like it for the mystery component. Edwards is a member of the Detection Club and has always wondered about the history of the writers themselves. He treats them like a mystery to be solved. I don't want to give too much away as I do want you to read this book and not have my "spoilers" swimming in your head. Christie, Berkley and Sayers were interesting characters on their own and each seemed to not just bring a style of writing but a background that intrigues you as much as their fiction.

I am a great fan of books from this time but also movies and old time radio programs. This Golden Age of Murder is one of my favorite types of mystery. Other than the books and individual biographies I have not seen a book that examines this important time with such passion. It is a big book and I was able to read it quickly. It is well-written but also very interesting - for book lovers, mystery fans but also those who appreciate history. There was so much going on in the world at this time so it is very interesting to see how it affects each writer and their works. Many of the authors were influenced by true cases and you can see that in the writing as Edwards point out. I have never actually read a mystery novel by Edwards but he is definitely going on the epic tbr list.

My Novelesque Blog

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## Deb Jones says

A well-researched book with appropriate citations by author Martin Edwards, but not done so the cited sources interfere with the easy flow of the narrative.

I was familiar with some of the authors of the Golden Age of Mystery, 1930 through 1947, but was introduced to so many more here. I'm happy to report I should have enough reading material from this era alone to keep me busy for many years, let alone intersperse them with more modern tales.

Edwards provides insights into the lives and backgrounds of some of the more well-known writers of the era and demonstrates how those authors' personalities and life experiences shaped their writing along with contributing to story plots.

If you're a fan of Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, G.K. Chesterton or any of the many other writers of that era, you might well enjoy this peek behind the curtains of their lives.

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## **John Frankham says**

This book is by Martin Edwards, who edits the British Library Crime Classics series, including introductions to the novels and the collections of short stories. He is steeped in the title subject, and it shows in the quality of the finished product.

Amending an earlier review:

This long, mainly chronological study, looks at the famous Detection Club, founded in 1930 by Dorothy Sayers, G.K. Chesterton and 36 other popular mystery writers of the time. It was a very diverse group comprised of authors who had fought in the Great War and were forever marked by it, from politicians, right wing Tories to fervent Marxists, clergy, and the aristocracy. They created tongue-in-cheek "rules" and an unusual initiation rite but they were serious in their efforts to illustrate that whodunnits were worthwhile reads. The book also covers, of course, Agatha Christie at length, and later members, such as Ngaio Marsh and Margery Allingham up to such as Michael Innes.

We also get an inside look at the lives of a few of the members, which hold some surprises and a bit of scandal. Some of the most famous books were based on actual crimes unknown to the modern reader. There are more than a few members with whom even the enthusiast may not be familiar, but many of their works are coming back into print, so can easily be accessed.

This is a fascinating read for the lover of the Golden Age of Mystery.

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## **Susan says**

This is a history of the Detection Club; an elite social network of crime writers, during the Golden Age period of 1930 – 1949. The book begins in 1937, with Ngaio Marsh attending a ritual dinner to elect the new President of the Detection Club, complete with 'Eric the Skull' and a host of crime writers who included founding members Dorothy L Sayers, Anthony Berkeley and Agatha Christie. Between the years this book covers, thirty nine members were elected. In order to be admitted to this elite company, writers had to produce work of 'admitted merit' – which was basically a code to keep out popular authors that members considered 'crude' such as Tiger Standish or 'Sapper.'

As well as being a fascinating history of the Detection club during this Golden era for crime writing, the author gives biographies of those involved, their relationships with each other, and also detours to discuss

true crimes of the time which inspired the members. Many of the members found the Club a refuge, where they could be themselves and discuss their craft with those who would understand their problems. Anthony Berkeley first approached other writers about organising a dining club to discuss matters concerning their craft and it led to many collaborative writing projects.

Importantly, criticisms levelled at Golden Age fiction are also tackled. Often derided as 'cosy' the author points out that most people were unwilling to face too much violence after the First World War and wished to be entertained. In a time of financial hardship, in the depression, novels set in exotic locations also gave a sense of escapism to readers. While living in a bed sit and coping with innumerable problems – including the personal tragedy of having to have her illegitimate son adopted and never publicly acknowledging him – Dorothy L Sayers responded by making her central character, Lord Peter Wimsey, have all the privilege and security that she was denied.

If you do enjoy Golden Age detective fiction then you will certainly adore this book as much as I did. The author muses on plots, novels, true crime of the era, how the authors used their books to refer to each other and there are endless interesting snippets and new books to discover. This book has, in fact, cost me an awful lot – because whilst reading it, I have constantly had to stop and look up authors and download books that I have missed or want to re-read. So many of my personal favourites are in here; from the three central characters of the book – Berkeley, Sayers and Christie – to Nicholas Blake, E.C.Bentley, John Dickson Carr, Gladys Mitchell, Margery Allingham, Edmund Crispin, Michael Innes and many, many more. My only sadness here was that one of my very favourite crime authors of the period, Christianna Brand, was obviously not liked by Martin Edwards, whose sniping whenever he mentioned her became a little wearing. Regardless of her love of gossip and possible unreliability, she was the author of many excellent crime novels, including "Green for Danger," and I felt she was being a little singled out for criticism. That aside, this was a tremendous read and I absolutely loved it and recommend it highly to any lovers of crime novels from the era between the wars.

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### **Kaitlyn Dunnett says**

Very complete history of Golden Age British mystery writers. Also very long. Parts were fascinating. Others, especially on writers I'd never heard of, I found myself skimming. Still, this is a reference book well worth owning and I suspect I will go back to it to find answers to questions. I especially liked two things, Martin Edwards's very readable writing style and the way he points out modern works that owe a debt to novels published in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. Prediction: this book will be a finalist for the Agatha at Malice Domestic 28.

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### **Andrea says**

The Detection Club was founded by Dorothy L Sayers, Agatha Christie and Anthony Berkeley (mainly by Sayers and Berkeley, with Christie a quieter contributor).

This history goes into the development of mysteries of the height of the Golden Age, seen through the lens of the Detection Club members. It discusses the background, personality and books of a lot of different members, but returns again and again to the three founders - Christie, enduringly the world's bestselling

author; Sayers, an able self-promoter, and Berkeley, the author you're least likely to have heard of out of the three, whose books involved a frisson of spanking, and whose opinion of women very hate/love/hate. This history did not leave me inspired to pick up Berkeley's work.

Fascinating in many other respects, particularly for readers like me who have read a TON of this sub-genre. I could have lived with less time spent on Berkeley and more on anyone else, but it was fun otherwise.

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## Leah says

### Detecting the Detection Club...

During the Golden Age of crime fiction in Britain – between the two world wars – some of the leading authors got together to form the Detection Club, an organisation that's still going strong today. At the time of writing this book, Martin Edwards had been elected to membership and was the archivist of the club, although he has since become President, following in the prestigious footsteps of such luminaries as GK Chesterton, Dorothy L Sayers, Agatha Christie and, more recently, HRF Keating and Simon Brett.

Although the Club was largely social in nature, Edwards sets out to show how the interactions of its members helped to define the style and direction of detective fiction in these early years. He suggests that in fact the existence of the club may be part of the reason that the Golden Age style of detective fiction lasted longer in Britain than elsewhere. Membership was by election only, so that existing members decided which writers could get in, and, as a result, exerted considerable control over which types of book were highly regarded within the community. Over the years several of the original members had a go at defining the “rules” of detective fiction, usually half-jokingly, but clearly indicating their own opinion of what fell within the definition.

The book is clearly very well researched – not an easy task since apparently many of the records of the Club were lost during the years of WW2. It's written in what I've come to see as Edwards' usual style for non-fiction – conversational, feeling as if one were having a discussion with a knowledgeable friend – and is therefore easy and enjoyable to read. It covers a lot of the same ground that he covers in his introductions to the various British Library Crime Classics and in his most recent *The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Novels*. By their nature, those other books force a structure on the way he gives information. In contrast, this one struck me as much looser in structure, often going off at tangents – one chapter, for example, starts with Agatha Christie meeting her second husband, then goes on to talk about séances in various writers' work, then ends up with a discussion on the Depression and the formation of the National Government! Personally, I enjoyed the structured style of *The Story of Classic Crime* more, but I think this is very much down to reader preference.

Where this book differs is by going much more deeply into the personal lives of the various authors who were members of the Club during the Golden Age – Sayers, Christie, Berkeley, the Coles, et al. I've said this before, but I'm not keen on knowing a lot about the authors whose books I enjoy since, if I end up not liking them on a personal basis, it can affect my enjoyment of their books. There were undoubtedly aspects of this that I found verged on the intrusive – tales of secret love affairs, unacknowledged illegitimate children, etc. But for the most part, Edwards is warm and affectionate towards his subjects, so there's no feeling of a hatchet job being done on any of them. Edwards also shows how these hidden episodes of their lives may have influenced their writing, which I suppose is a justification for revealing things they tried hard to keep private while they were alive. (Do I sound somewhat disapprovingly judgemental there? I tried hard not to, but I think I failed...)

To a degree, the book follows a linear timeline although with a lot of digressions. Edwards talks informatively about how detective fiction was influenced by current events, such as the Depression of the '30s, or the rise of the various dictatorships in the pre-WW2 years. He also discusses and rather dismisses the idea that Golden Age crime fiction was culturally snobbish – I disagree – but suggests that it was often intellectually snobbish – I agree. I do find that just occasionally Edwards comes over as somewhat dogmatic in his opinions – he has a tendency to dismiss anyone who holds a different point of view. He also clearly has favourites amongst the authors – Sayers is mentioned more often than everyone else put together, I suspect! But that all adds to the personal, conversational feel of the book.

Overall, then, an enjoyable and informative read, maybe more geared towards people who enjoy personal biographies of their favourite authors, but with plenty of stuff about the history of the crime novel for the rest of us. And because there's quite a lot of crossover between this and *The Story of Classic Crime*, they could easily be read either as companion pieces, or the reader could select the style that would most suit – more biographical about the authors in this one, more concentration on the books in the other.

[www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com](http://www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com)

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### **Bev says**

Fantastic and fascinating book that is an absolute must-have for anyone with interest in the Golden Age of mysteries, crime, and detection. The Golden Age is one of my favorite periods for detective novels and it was an absolute delight to get an inside view of the Detection Club. It is just a real shame that the Club did not have an Archivist before Martin Edwards and that the Minute Book and other materials from the time of the Club's inception through the Blitz have disappeared. What a treasure trove of information that would have been. Edwards gives us a detailed look at the original members of the Club--tracing their careers and investigating certain mysterious circumstances in their lives. And even though many of the authors' mysteries were already familiar to me (as a long-time reader of Golden Age crime fiction), Edwards managed to discover new and interesting tidbits about even the most well-known of the Golden Age writers. Pacing is just a tad slow in places and there a tendency to revisit some of the key events (Christie's disappearance and Sayers' secret shame, for instance), but overall a definite winner that all mystery lovers need to have on their reference shelf. ★★★★★ and a half.

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

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### **Nikki says**

There's a lot going on in this novel — it tracks the development of crime fiction and mystery stories, deals with the biographies of various famous Golden Age crime writers (including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Anthony Berkeley, of course) and deals with the development of the Detection Club. There's a lot of stuff I didn't know, even about Sayers (whose work I adore), and the whole thing left me feeling that my experience of the Golden Age of crime fiction was rather limited. Fortunately, and not coincidentally, Martin Edwards has also been curating the publication of the British Library Crime Classics, so I've been able to check out some of the authors that were totally unfamiliar to me (and I have a whole stack more to get to, too).

It's an enjoyable read, though it does get a little bogged down or distracted at times — I think because it does try to tackle so much. It doesn't stick purely to a single writer, but nor does it stay firmly focused on the

Detection Club as a whole. If you're interested in the period, though, it's a gem.

Reviewed for the Bibliophibian.

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### **Susan says**

I ordered this book, thinking it was another of Edwards' anthologies . Instead it's a history and, in a gentle and loving way , an expose of the foibles of early members of the Detection Club. Edwards also gives brief descriptions (in vague terms--no spoilers!) of some of their best, or just best known, books. Extensive chapter notes give some supplementary information. While I loved it, and loved seeing some information on favorite writers who are obscure now, I'm also not sure who else will be interested in the book's big reveal, of the long-standing romance between two married (not to each other) writers, neither of whom is well-remembered.

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### **Jill Hutchinson says**

Needless to say, as a golden age mystery fan, this book put me in 7th heaven. It is a large book but does not need a long review. Basically it looks at the famous Detection Club, founded in 1930 by Dorothy Sayers, G.K Chesterton and 36 other popular mystery writers of the time. It was a very diverse group comprised of authors who had fought in the Great War and were forever marked by it, politicians, right wing Tories to fervent Marxists, clergy, and the aristocracy. They created tongue-in-cheek "rules" and an unusual initiation rite but they were serious in their efforts to illustrate that mystery stories were not pulp fiction but actual worthwhile reads.

We also get an inside look at the lives of a few of the members, which hold some surprises and a bit of scandal. I was surprised to learn that some of the most famous books were based on actual crimes which are practically unknown to the modern reader. I have to admit that there were a few members with whom I was not familiar and I intend to trace down some of their works.

This is a fascinating read for the lover of the Golden Age of Mystery. In a word, "terrific"!

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### **Christina Dudley says**

Very informative and interesting about mystery writers and the elite Detectives Club some of them started in 1930. I confess to skimming the bits on authors I'd never heard of, but the parts on Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers were good.

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