

Death Comes to Pemberley

P.D.James

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an author in possession of a good plot must be in want of a plagiarist.

Madam,

Being somewhat acquainted with the Bennet family myself, I must protest most vociferously regarding the brief history of the daughters of that family with which the author regales us in the foreword to this *novella*. I can hardly countenance with equanimity the defamatory depiction of the character of the daughters of that household. Whilst I will confess to, *ahem*, a certain quiet affection for the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I am confident that any disinterested party would not endorse the interpretation of the good matrimonial fortune of the Misses Bennet as being the result (and I will be forthright) of *scheming* - a vulgarity of which no true lady would be capable. Admittedly, I had occasion to observe, on my prior acquaintance with these young ladies, that they seemed to command an impressively detailed knowledge of their male neighbours' yearly incomes. But that, I think, is merely to their credit, being no doubt the result of a keen intelligence. And in defence of the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet, not that I admit to any defence being necessary, I recall that she first refused Mr Darcy's offer. Surely this is proof positive that Elizabeth is entirely innocent of that unflattering character flaw, *social climbing*. And only the most cynical might entertain the suspicion that this initial refusal was merely confabulated to provide her with amour against such an accusation. However, as the author notes, "*Elizabeth knew that she was not formed for the sad contrivances of poverty*". I also would like to convey my delight at the news of the marriage of the former Miss Mary Bennet, a most pleasing, if unexpected, eventuality - though I would not exchange places with her husband.

Yours in faith,

W.Collins, reverend.

I will not attempt a review in Austen-speak. Why should I given that P.D.James herself failed to sustain the tone for long? My prejudice (sorry) before reading the book was "why bother"? The main benefit of having read the book is to convert prejudice to valid criticism. For other authors to write sequels, or further adventures, of characters first created by the likes of Conan Doyle or Ian Fleming is, I think, fair game. To attempt the same for, say, Tolstoy or Dickens, would be to push hubris towards the suicidal. Where Austen lies in this spectrum I don't know, but closer to the latter than the former I would suggest. Consequently the exercise is at best pointless and certainly hazardous. For Austen purists the outcome is a foregone conclusion: irritation at the sacrilege. For who-dun-it readers on the other hand, the Austen back-story was never likely to add much. That said, if handled cleverly, a story could have been woven around these borrowed characters.

But James makes no attempt to deploy the characters of *Pride & Prejudice* at all. Instead the insipid plot is played out by people bearing Austen names but with no relation to the original Austen characters. Where was Darcy's haughty but unimpeachable propriety? Where was Elizabeth's vitality and social intelligence? If

one must indulge in such a travesty (and I wouldn't) then surely our Lizzie is a shoe-in for the sleuth character. Only Wickham's history is used to any degree in the plot. To have borrowed Austen's characters only to reduce them to wraiths is bad enough. But the plot itself is unengaging even as a routine who-dun-it. Who would have guessed that the sinister cottage in the woods might shortly form the back-drop to a murder? Initials carved into trees, eh? Not come across that one before. There are wide acres of purposeless verbiage which add nothing to plot, description or character. Like the sickly Miss de Bourgh, this story "*makes negligible impact on the world*". (And, as a minor annoyance, the use of the term "police" is an anachronism).

There are a few nice touches which are almost Austen-like, though only a few. I liked the explanation that "*Charlotte had acquired some skill in the management of male delinquencies and her method with her husband was ingenious. She consistently congratulated him on qualities he did not possess in the hope that, flattered by her praise and approval, he would acquire them*", and also Lady de Bourgh's, "*I have never approved of protracted dying; it is an affectation in the aristocracy; in the lower classes it is merely an excuse for avoiding work*". I presume these are not actually real Austen quotes - or are they? Also James does manage at one point to reproduce Mr Bennet's manner of speaking nicely, though thankfully she does not attempt that of Mrs Bennet. The allusion to "Emma" in the disposal of Wickham's by-blow is not lost on me but appears gratuitous.

Verdict: It's a who-dun-it in stolen gift wrapping. I don't like who-dun-its. Fundamentally unedifying it serves primarily as a reminder of the difference between literature and a mere string of words.

Spoiler alert: It wasn't the colonel in the woods with the candlestick after all.