

# What Is a “Pymish” Mystery Novel?

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All of us here today are quite familiar with the world of Barbara Pym. We know well her distinctive writing style, her subject matter and themes, her recurring character types, and her distinctive narrative voice. This world has become so recognizable that even readers who are not particular fans of Pym understand the reference when someone says that a novel is “very like Barbara Pym.” As Pym enthusiasts, however, we probably are much more excited by such references than the general reading public, so you can well imagine how delighted I was to read the following quotation on the back of a recent M.C. Beaton mystery novel:

Welcome back to Carsely, the charming Cotswolds village that’s home to the 16th Agatha Raisin mystery. (If you’ve missed the first 15, just imagine a Barbara Pym novel with murder, mayhem and the sexual longings of a 50-something divorced lady sleuth.) – Review of *The Perfect Paragon*

When I sent this Pym sighting to Ellen for *Green Leaves*, she responded by asking if I would do a presentation at this meeting on Pym-inspired or “Pymish” mystery writers. As a great admirer of both Barbara Pym and British mystery novels, I was delighted to be asked. I have selected six British mystery writers (with a digression on a seventh) who have been compared directly to Barbara Pym in reviews or informal discussions. My choices are personal and subjective, so I am sure that the mystery readers among you will think of other mystery writers whom you would compare to Pym. I hope that you will mention them in the discussion period after my talk.

Incidentally, as I was looking through old copies of the *Barbara Pym Newsletter*, I found a note in the December 1986 issue from Janice Rossen which said: “Seen recently at a Crown book store in La Crescenta, California: Barbara Pym’s *The Sweet Dove Died* in the Murder Mystery section. When the mistake was pointed out, the sales clerk declined to change the book’s location. ‘That’s where we always put it, he declared’” (“Very Public Eye” 8). Furthermore, I discovered at the Waterboro Public Library’s website a list of June birthdays of writers that includes that of “British comic and mystery novelist Barbara Pym,” and she is also identified as a mystery writer at the Fantastic Fiction website. What an intriguing bit of misinformation to find while thinking about this topic! It is true that Pym practiced sleuthing as an undergraduate at Oxford and to a certain degree later in London, and one could argue that *An Academic Question* could be construed as a mystery, at least in part. She even tried her hand at writing a spy novel, complete with intrigue and secrets in the early 1940s. But I think it is stretching it too far to call her a *mystery* writer.

Not surprisingly, mystery novels that remind readers of Pym almost always have one or more of the following elements: eccentric, amusing, or even quirky characters, such as pairs of elderly spinsters living together, unmarried women of a certain age, vicars who are experts in unusual fields, pedantic archivists, snoopy librarians, or egocentric clerics. Such novels depict amusing situations; have a village, church, or small community setting; and are often narrated with an ironic, bemused, or genteel voice. Clerical mysteries certainly bring Pym to mind, as do those classified as “cozies,” or “gentle mysteries.” For those of you not familiar with the term, cozies generally do not describe violence in any great detail, though there is usually at least one murder. Often they have a closed setting, such as a village or stately home. They have a small number of suspects and typically feature amateur detectives. Whether amateur or professional, though, the detective in a cozy always, I think it’s safe to say, discovers the murderer and restores order to the community. Obviously not all such novels could be described as Pymlike. Not all crime novels set in a church or small English village or that have eccentric characters drinking tea are Pymish, but many such

novels strike a familiar chord. Something resonates with Pymians that makes us think, “Ah! That sounds so much like Barbara Pym. . . .” And that is what I am talking about today: mystery writers whose novels remind us of Pym, that have some of the familiar and dear characteristics of Pym’s novels and that, because of it, give us added pleasure.

I will begin with M. C. Beaton, whose Agatha Raisin novels have been compared to a Barbara Pym novel with murder, mayhem, and sex. A Scottish-born writer living in the Cotswolds, Beaton has two long-standing series, one featuring Hamish MacBeth, a village constable in Scotland, and the other Agatha Raisin, a divorcee retired from her public relations firm in London to live in a small Cotswold village, where she gains a reputation as an amateur sleuth. I enjoy both series, have read every one of them, and would agree—to a point—that there are indeed Pymish accents in the Agatha Raisin series. Agatha is a smart middle-aged woman searching for love or at least a relationship with a man; the men she meets are egocentric and insensitive, albeit good looking; the novels almost always take place in a small village; the plot frequently features a stranger coming into the community and disrupting it; and recurring characters include a chatty and helpful cleaning woman, a kindly vicar’s wife and her curmudgeonly husband, and a variety of widowed or divorced women with their eyes on the men that Agatha fancies.

But one can go only so far in comparing the Agatha Raisin novels to those by Pym. Whereas Pym’s central characters are typically gentle and sensitive to the needs of others, Agatha Raisin is an aggressive, abrasive personality whose own needs come first. She is, as Marilyn Stasio describes her in the *New York Times*, “an amateur sleuth who is crude and rude, but nobody’s fool. . . . A stocky middle-aged woman with a round, rather pugnacious face and small, bearlike eyes,” she is self-important, pushy, nosy, and manipulative (Review of *Potted Gardener*). Or, as Helene Androski of the University of Wisconsin suggests, “Cross Miss Marple with a barracuda and you get Agatha Raisin” (*Women Mystery Writers*). Beaton does not write with Pym’s characteristic gentle irony or amused detachment, though the situations that Agatha gets herself into are funny. Nor does Beaton have Pym’s graceful writing style: hers is often awkward, the novels sometimes read as if they were hastily written, and there is little depth of character development. But over the course of 17 novels, readers get to know Agatha herself fairly well, and I think it is her personality alone that draws readers back to each new book: we want to know what kind of silly mess she gets herself into this time.

*Agatha Raisin and the Quiche of Death* introduces Agatha Raisin, who has just moved to the village of Carsely and wants to befriend the locals. When she sees a poster for the annual quiche-baking contest, she’s determined to win it. Never mind that she can’t cook. She drives to London, buys a quiche at her favorite deli, and enters it in the contest as her own. Unfortunately, the quiche has somehow been poisoned and the judge of the contest dies after tasting it. To get on the good side of the villagers, Agatha feels compelled to find out who put the poison in the quiche. A later novel, *Agatha Raisin and the Case of the Curious Curate* (2003), finds Agatha searching for the murderer of the adorable and well-liked new curate of Carsely to clear the local vicar, on whom suspicion has fallen. Throughout the series, Agatha gets herself into dangerous situations, repeatedly makes bad decisions, has numerous problems with the men in her love life, and alienates more people than she befriends. Yet she always solves the murder and remains a very solid presence. The Cotswold village where Agatha Raisin lives and the inhabitants of her small community are reminiscent of Barbara Pym’s village novels, and the novels are escapist fun.

Fun, too, are the novels of Joan Coggin, another British mystery writer with some similarities to Pym. Born in 1898, Coggin was older than Pym but died the same year that Pym did, in 1980. She worked as a nurse until 1930 when she started writing, wrote a few girls’ books under the pseudonym “Joanna Lloyd,” and published four mystery novels in the mid-1940s featuring the scatter-brained amateur sleuth Lady Lupin Lorrimer Hastings. Lady Lupin is the young, lovely, and kindhearted wife to the much-older, but very handsome, vicar of St. Marks Parish in Glanville, Sussex. Here is how Rue Morgue Press (which has reissued all four of the novels) describes her in *Who Killed the Curate?*:

When it comes to matters clerical, [Lady Lupin] literally doesn't know Jews from Jesuits and she's hopelessly at sea at the meetings of the Mothers' Union, Girl Guides, or Temperance Society. . . . Imagine Gracie Allen of Burns and Allen or Pauline Collins of *No, Honestly* as a sleuth and you might get a tiny idea of what Lupin is like.

There are definitely Pymish accents or overtones in Coggin's novels, and I found myself marking a number of passages that brought Pym to mind. For instance, in *Who Killed the Curate?*, Miss Simkins, like a number of other characters, is a possible suspect for the murder of the curate. She has done something that she confesses to Lady Lupin, ending with "I shall kill myself." Lady Lupin says, soothingly:

"Oh, I shouldn't, if I were you. It's so cold; besides, it would all come out at the inquest, why you did it . . . most unpleasant. I should have a nice cup of tea" (how clever of me to think of that. I believe I am really cut out to be a vicar's wife after all; I know just what to do on every occasion!)" (53).

Compare that with the familiar passage at the beginning of *Excellent Women* when we learn that Mildred is "capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life. . . ." (6). But, whereas Pym explores the emotional depths of intelligent women with quiet humor, Coggin treats Lady Lupin as an air-brained caricature. Whereas Pym's central characters are observant, everything seems to go over Lady Lupin's head. Much of it is broad or exaggerated comedy, not subtle in the way that so much of Pym is. Here is another typical passage:

Lady Lupin: "Oh, my dears, it was too frightful. . . . a horrible creepy afternoon. . . . It was all like something out of Pope. Do I mean Pope, Andrew?"

Andrew: "No, I think you mean Edgar Allan Poe, darling."

Lady Lupin: "Yes, of course, or Edgar Wallace. You know what I mean, absolutely too eerie for words, all wind and rain, and the sea looking too unfriendly, and then this woman just like a witch. I know, Macbeth, that was what I was really thinking of. I can just see her stirring her cauldron." (81)

And then, quite pleased with herself for remembering the passage so well, she proceeds to badly misquote it, starting with "Fillet of something snake,/In the cauldron boil and bake," and ending with "For a charm of something trouble,/Like a hell-soup boil and bubble" (81). Not, I think, the way a Pym woman would quote a literary passage. So while I find Coggin's Lady Lupin delightful in her own way, she seems to me to lack the depth of character of Pym's protagonists. Fortunately, after the first novel, motherhood and experience with the parish settle Lady Lupin down quite a bit and she becomes less ridiculous and more endearing and lovable, still funny and entertaining. As the editors of Rue Morgue Press comment in a very Pymian way, "She's that rarity in cozy crime fiction—in spite of her many eccentricities she seems more real than most of the people we encounter in real life" (Coggin, "Orchard House" 6).

A mystery writer whose novels are more like Barbara Pym's is D. M. Greenwood. With degrees from Oxford in classics and London University in theology, she worked for many years for the diocese of Rochester (England) and retired as director of education from there in 2004. She published a series of nine novels in the 1990s featuring Theodora Braithwaite, a 30-something deaconess in the Church of England serving in the fictional diocese of Medewich. Braithwaite, who stands over six feet tall, comes from a long line of English clerics but has no desire to become a priest herself. An academic committed to her work in the inner city, she "ride[s] her sturdy bicycle through the litter strewn streets in search of pastoral adventure or forensic titillation" (Kirk). Braithwaite is sensible, smart, and keenly aware of the weaknesses and foibles of the priests she works with and the Church she serves. Greenwood has said that her novels, which she describes as "social comedy," were "initially triggered by anger," and she takes as her theme "the tension between what the clergy say and what they actually do" (Grossett). She vents this anger—or frustration—with very sharp and critical commentary in her novels, or, as one reviewer has said of her: "In between deliciously observed passages of urban desolation Greenwood's acid pen attacks all forms of liberal cant and trendiness with something more sinister than vigour" (Kirk). The clergy in Greenwood's novels are

almost always targets of caustic commentary, and the novels are littered with dead clerics, whose murders Theodora Braithwaite helps the police solve. In reviewing Greenwood's *Mortal Spoils*, Val Mc Dermid writes that

she brings the world she knows to vivid and unsentimental life, avoiding stereotypes and creating a vigorous cast of characters who are too flawed to be saintly, but too human to be entirely blamed. She writes entertainingly and intelligently about a church under pressure and her insights are valuable. Sharp, strong and to be savoured like a mature cheddar.

We see this sharpness in *Unholy Ghosts*, for instance, where we find Theodora helping to solve the murder of Father Hereward Marr, an aggressive, unreliable and frequently intoxicated parish priest whose body is discovered in a pit and whose wife has disappeared. When Theodora is told of the death, she has trouble imagining it:

“You mean he fell into a pit which he had himself dug which was connected with the building’s central heating system?” She tried to keep the incredulity out of her tone. The Archdeacon nodded unhappily. It was untidy. It was undignified. It was un-Anglican. It would undoubtedly lead to a lot of administrative activity. It was all he most hated. (38)

Another example of her sharply critical tone occurs in *Idol Bones* with this description of the bishop:

His ability not merely to look helpless but actually to be so, had stood him in good stead all his professional life. The good willed, especially amongst the laity, flocked to help him. He had no pride, no shame. He knew (and the more sophisticated of his rescuers knew) that he did them a kindness in allowing them scope for their charity. (35-36)

Greenwood's amused look at the Anglican church and its clerics reminds me very much of Barbara Pym, though I would say that her view is more satirical than Pym's and at times even cynical. Still, she writes well and has an insider's understanding of the inner workings of the Church. Theodora Braithwaite is an admirable woman whom we get to know well as the series develops, though she does seem at times too good to be true. She shares her creator's understanding of what makes the Church work and the human failings of its leaders, and she approaches each fresh murder with earnest Christian determination to discover the evil-doer and restore—insofar as it is possible—calm and order to the chaos that evil creates.

For something of Barbara Pym's humor and delicious wit, I recommend the delightful mysteries of Catherine Aird set in the imaginary county Calleshire in southern England and featuring Inspector C. D. Sloan (“Seedy” to his friends). Her novels have a village setting, a somewhat sardonic police inspector with a well-meaning but rather thick partner, and a host of Pym-like quirky characters. “Catherine Aird” is the pseudonym of Kinn Hamilton McIntosh. Born and raised in Huddersfield, England, she holds an honorary M.A. degree from the University of Kent and was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) for her work with the British Girl Guides. For many years she worked as an assistant to her father, a local doctor, and actively participated in civic affairs. She lives near Canterbury in Kent. I'm sure you all are familiar with a quotation that is commonly attributed to her: “If you can't be a good example, then you'll just have to be a horrible warning” (Catherine Aird homepage).

*The Religious Body*, first in the Calleshire Chronicles (which now number more than 20), sees Inspector Sloan solving the murder of a nun in a convent. Sister Anne has been thrown down the cellar steps and Inspector Sloan finds himself confronted with (and dismayed by) 50 possible suspects, all nuns trained to keep their eyes averted at all time, all of them wearing identical black habits, and all of them having assumed names. *Henrietta Who?*, her second, finds Sloan investigating a hit-and-run murder in rural Calleshire County, and her third, *The Stately Home Murder* is set in the 300-room Ornum House, which is now from financial necessity open to the public. When the young son of one of the tourists pries open the helmet of a suit of armor and finds the body of Meredith, the family archivist, stuffed inside, Inspector Sloan must interview a bevy of eccentric family members, the local librarian, and the Vicar of Ornum. Jean Swanson and Dean James in their very useful book *By a Woman's Hand* comment that “this novel's solution contains

one of the great literary jokes of mystery fiction, and Aird pulls it off with great panache. Indeed, through much of her work, Aird's sense of humor is a strong undercurrent, lending a light touch that distinguishes Aird from some contemporaries for whom humor is sometimes a mystery in itself" (25).

Reviews of Aird's novels almost always comment on her comic touch. For instance, *The New Yorker*, following initial publication of *The Religious Body*, wrote: "In the field of murders and mysteries, Catherine Aird is a shining new star. She writes extremely well about the kind of 'ordinary' talkative, interesting people no sensible reader can resist. Miss Aird is a most ingenious lady" (qtd. in AudioPartners). *The [London] Times* reports that "Aird's delicious concoctions are never less than elegant and mischievously sharp; and she manipulates her often bizarre plots and people with confidence" (qtd. in AudioPartners). And *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* writes that "Aird's touch is as lightly comic as her plot is deftly cunning" (qtd. in AudioPartners). Aird is also very fond of puns and plays on words, especially when titles of poems, plays, or novels work to comic effect. It is Aird's light comic touch, her deliciously wry sense of humor, and her narrative voice that especially remind me of Barbara Pym.

For it seems to me that perhaps the most distinctive feature of mysteries that make the comparison to Pym most appropriate is *voice*, or the tone of the narrator, from whose perspective the story is told. Pym's voice might most accurately be described as genteel, in all that the word means or implies: civilized, cultured, polite, refined, well-bred. As Dale Salwak said at the Harvard Pym conference in 2005, it is "a voice that is speaking directly to us, in private, in its own distinctive, soothing, and enthralling way. Unsentimental and wise, the voice behind the characters in [Pym's] novels beguiles us early and will not let go. ... [Hers is a] gentle and genteel sensibility."

Kate Charles and Lucy Walker's commentary on the genteel voice in *The Oxford Companion to Mystery and Crime Writing* uses the example of Barbara Pym:

The concept of the genteel voice . . . is an elusive one, recognizable when encountered but difficult to define. . . . [Barbara Pym's] trenchant comedies of manners were set in a world of prim, well-bred spinsters and proper clergymen. In [her novels] there exists a subversive element, an irony, an underlying recognition that gentility is only skin deep. (485)

Hazel Holt's novels articulate the genteel voice in her creation of "a Pym-like amateur detective in Sheila Malory" (Charles and Walker 486). Hazel Holt is familiar to us as the close friend, literary executor, and biographer of Barbara Pym. A graduate of Newnham College, Cambridge, and a former television reviewer and feature writer for *Stage and Television Today*, she worked for many years with Barbara Pym at the International African Institute in London. Holt has written many novels featuring Sheila Malory, a truly genteel and gentle widow of retirement age who lives in Taviscombe, a fictitious English West Country town that is very similar to Minehead, Somerset, where Hazel Holt herself lives. Mrs. Malory usually solves crimes locally, though one novel is set in Oxford and another takes place in a Pennsylvania college town. An Oxford graduate, she loves literature, like many of Pym's characters, and is herself a writer on minor Victorian poets and a reviewer for literary magazines.

Holt's novels are quintessentially English, what one reviewer describes as "the kind you can read in front of a fire on a cold rainy day. It's a lovely little slice of English Christmas Fayres and Red Cross auctions amidst teas and constitutionals" (Dillon). Charles and Walker cite Holt's second novel, *The Cruellest Month*, as an example of the genteel voice in mysteries. It is "replete with the trappings of academic gentility: Oxford's dreaming spires, tea with cream cakes, William Morris wallpaper, and cricket on the green. The first-person narrative reinforces the genteel tone" (486). Helene Androski writes of Holt that "if [Barbara] Pym had written mysteries they would have read like [Holt's] novels" (website), and Radmila May, in her article "Murder Most Oxford" says that "Sheila Malory is very much a Pym character."

Bernard Knight, reviewing Holt's 2005 novel *No Cure for Death*, calls her the "unchallenged 'Queen of the Cosies'" and observes:

She has a remarkable gift for writing all the things that the reader agrees with, from the awful system of appointments in general practice to the control freakery that now permeates every level of British society. This political incorrectness is leavened by cookery recipes, the behaviour of her cat and dog as well as all the things that we of advancing years feel is wrong with the world! Yet all this is offered with a wit and cheerfulness that makes reading a Hazel Holt 'whodunnit' a real pleasure, assuring us that we are not quite alone in our belief that modern society is going down the tubes. (Tangled Web)

Knight's comments make it clear why Hazel Holt is regarded as a true cozy writer—she is comforting and comfortable, familiar, and homey, a feature that may mark one difference between Holt and Pym. As Radmila May suggests of Holt's novels, "the Pym irony is lacking and Malory has a certain 'mumsy' quality that one would not find in a Pym novel." [mumsy (adjective) Usage: Brit. cosy and comfortable, homelike. ] Sheila Malory may have this "mumsy" quality, but Holt's novels resonate with the Pym voice. Reading a Hazel Holt novel, one cannot help but feel the distinct influence of Barbara Pym.

Kate Charles's novels, too, resonate with that voice. Indeed, one person who posted to the Barbara Pym List in 2000 when members were discussing which mystery writers have a Pymish slant went so far as to say that "she is probably the Pymmiest author I've ever read outside of Barbara herself" (Rosen). Kate Charles is the pen name of Carol Chase, an American native and British citizen living in Ludlow, England, who explores in her Book of Psalms and other mysteries actual controversies in the contemporary Church of England. In an interview, when she was asked what she aimed for in her work and how she would describe her novels, Charles replied:

When I wrote my first book, I described it as "Barbara Pym meets P.D. James." I think that still holds pretty true. I want to capture and explore the things I love about the Church of England, but it's by no means an uncritical love, and I'm always on the look-out for issues in the Church which inspire strong feelings -- in me and others. (Spencer-Fleming)

Elsewhere, a reviewer of *A Dead Man out of Mind* writes for *The Christian Science Monitor*: "Like P.D. James, Kate Charles knows the advantage of putting a group of people in a closed setting and watching them mingle and murder.... [H]er characters are what might happen if Barbara Pym's 'excellent women' got together in the study after the vicar went out" (qtd. in "Charles," *Tangled Web*) and a reviewer of *Cruel Habitations* called that novel "a cross between Barbara Pym and P. D. James" (*Friends of the Temple Public Library* 3).

As an aside, I would say that these comparisons of Kate Charles to P. D. James are at the very least intriguing and certainly relevant to my focus today. James has said that Barbara Pym is one of her favorite writers and in fact gave a heartfelt and very moving talk about Pym at the 2003 Pym Society meeting in Oxford, where she was made an honorary member of the society. At least three of her novels have references to Barbara Pym, and in fact, one reviewer of *A Taste for Death* enjoys "all those hallmark details of tea preparation and descriptions of elegant and not so elegant gardens. It's like reading Barbara Pym with the additional benefit of a horrible set of murders thrown in" (Patten). Katherine Duncan-Jones, reviewing *The Murder Room*, writes:

A richly absorbing, generous narrative frame allows James scope for moments of Barbara Pymish cosiness as well as scenes of du Maupassant-like horror, the two styles being skillfully interwoven. Here, after discovering a particularly horrible death, two elderly women comfort each other à la Pym: "They sat at the table opposite to each other. The scrambled egg was perfect, creamy and warm and slightly peppery. There was a sprig of parsley on each plate." Pym-like too is James's palpable pleasure in describing the "gloriously adorned interior" of All Saints, Margaret Street, in which "as the door is closed behind her the quiet air and the serried ranks of empty chairs imparted a more subtle mystery." (Qtd. in 'Pym Gleanings')

Indeed, James's characterization of her own writing reminds me of Pym herself. At the Random House "official website of P. D. James," there is a page with "mystery writing lessons." James notes that "a first class mystery should also be a first class novel," and that to bring the story to life, it must be true to life: "You must go through life with all your senses open to experiences, good and bad," she says. "Empathize with other people, and believe that nothing which happens to a true writer is ever wasted." This sounds very like Barbara Pym's own philosophy.

Returning to Kate Charles, her novels all have to do with some aspect of what she describes as "the gap between the ideal of the institution and the all-too-human foibles of the people who constitute that institution" (Spencer-Fleming). She writes astutely and with confidence of the Church of England, drawing on her own experiences as both a former employee and a devout member of the Church. As the *London Times* notes: "The modern ecclesiastical mystery ... is a fast-growing sub-group of whodunnity; no one is more skilled at it than Kate Charles. With the lightest of touches, she weaves the goriest murders into a convincing and provocative backdrop of clerical politics... Thoroughly entertaining, even to those of no religious bent" (qtd. in "Charles").

Charles's first novel, *A Drink of Deadly Wine*, is about the "outing" of gay clergy in the Church of England. This novel introduces architect David Middleton-Brown and artist Lucy Kingsley to one another and to readers, and the two amateur sleuths subsequently become very good friends and then lovers in the remaining four novels of the series. *The Snares of Death*, second in the series, examines the High Church/Low Church controversy. This novel has some fine Pymish touches, including an obnoxious, self-centered, domineering Evangelical Anglican vicar determined to rid his new church of all traces of "idolatry" and Papism. It also has a cast of Pymish eccentrics, including two elderly spinsters living in Monkey Puzzle Cottage, one of whom browbeats and berates the other, very much in the manner of Miss Doggett berating Jesse Morrow in *Crampton Hodnet*.

Her third novel, *Appointed to Die* explores infighting among church clergy, while *A Dead Man out of Mind*, deals with the ordination of women priests in the Church and *Evil Angels Among Them* explores the consequences of the Church's financial crisis. In all of these novels, we see what the *Sunday New York Times Book Review* calls "real tenderness ... in her detailed portraits of the faithful, from the sensitive student of church architecture who functions as sleuth to the dear old church biddies who arrange the flowers and spread the gossip with as much relish as the witches in *Macbeth*" (qtd. in "Charles"). Charles has written five more novels since the Book of Psalms series, the first three of which are stand-alones, with no recurring characters, but each one with a Church of England backdrop. Her last two, *Evil Intent* and *Secret Sins* (out this month in the US from Poison Pen Press) feature a young, newly ordained woman named Callie Anson.

Kate Charles draws wonderfully vivid characters and scenes, and she is quite skillful at creating a strong sense of place. While the novels are mysteries with murder and intrigue woven into the plot, Charles's focus is more on character, especially in everyday situations like flower arranging for the church altar, providing the best cream cakes at tea for the local vicar, and pursuing the ongoing daily activities of church folk in a small English town or cathedral close. Often she is humorous and satirical, not in a sharply critical way but gently, in the manner of Barbara Pym. Over and over reviewers of her novels draw the comparison with Pym: A writer for the *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* remarks that [*A Drink of Deadly Wine*] is "thoughtful, mature, and mesmerizing . . . a mystery very reminiscent of Pym." A *Publisher's Weekly* review of *Cruel Habitations* comments: "Cold rain, gallons of tea, and eccentric characters generate a cozy Barbara Pym-like atmosphere. . . . This is for genteel readers who appreciate a hint of sex" (*Publishers Weekly.com*). And a reviewer for the *Library Journal* writes: "With a keen eye for motivation and a thorough knowledge of church politics, the author delivers a clever, thoughtful story ... Fans of Barbara Pym ... should enjoy this series" (qtd. in "Charles"). Charles herself has always spoken of the influence of Barbara Pym on her novels: "[I]t is the characters that are important, and in this my books are very much in the tradition of Barbara Pym. 'A bloodstained version of the world of Barbara Pym' is the review quote

I most treasure. She has been and remains the most profound literary influence on my work” (*Kate Charles* website).

Catherine Aird, D. M. Greenwood, Hazel Holt, and Kate Charles are, in my opinion, excellent examples of mystery writers whose works have strong Pymish overtones. Charles and Holt have been directly influenced by Barbara Pym, and they are the two writers to turn to if you want to hear strong echoes of Pym’s voice in British mysteries. But the other writers also have their wonderful Pymish touches, especially Catherine Aird and D. M. Greenwood, nor can you go wrong reading M.C. Beaton and Joan Coggin. There is much that one might describe as a Pymish quality in many of the novels by all of these mystery writers. And though they are not written by Barbara Pym herself, they certainly evoke her voice and remind us of that writer who has brought us all here this weekend.

Kathy Ackley, Professor Emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, is author of *The Novels of Barbara Pym* (1989) and editor of *Women and Violence in Literature* (1990), *Misogyny in Literature* (1992), *Essays from Contemporary Culture* (5 editions), and *Perspectives on Contemporary Issues: Readings Across the Disciplines* (currently working on 5th edition). She organizes an annual summer trip to England for a British Mystery and Crime Writers program ([www.britishmysterytrips.com](http://www.britishmysterytrips.com)).

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