

An awful lot happens in Margery Allingham's novels. They are not just dense with multiple murders, locked rooms, cunning plots, sudden reversals, devilish twists, but also with goofy comic turns and sudden anti-climaxes that are reminiscent of PG Wodehouse rather than Agatha Christie, and with unearthly portents, supernatural events, shadows and moonlight and troubling dreams, whose wildness takes us into the world that Wilkie Collins evoked in novels like *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*.

Allingham's extraordinary creation, the bespectacled, buck-teethed, garrulous and apparently dimwitted Albert Campion - part-aristocrat, part-detective, part-criminal, part-genius, part fool - leads the reader through this maze, from the very English surface, where characters are decent coves and jolly old fruits and murder a bit of a bother, to the darkness and perversity that lies beneath. And Julia Jones - no fool, but certainly an indefatigable detective - leads us through the same contradictions in Margery Allingham's own life, which on the surface seemed so uneventful but which contained much suffering and turbulence. She shows us her cheerfulness and her very English stoicism, and also the dark days of her depression. There is never a moment when we do not feel in safe hands.

This is a wonderful and evocative biography, sympathetic, fair-minded, intelligent, always interesting both about her subject and the world that she came from, managing to gather up the personal details and place them in a cultural and social context. Some biographies manage to close a life down, but this one opens it up, evoking an age that has vanished and a body of writing that has survived. And it triumphantly passes the acid test of any literary biography: leads you back to the beguiling works themselves.