

Queen of Crime lived and breathed Essex

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Margery Allingham. Pictures courtesy of The Margery Allingham Society

Agatha Christie and Dorothy L Sayers aren't England's only 'Queens of Crime'. Margery Allingham, who lived and breathed East Anglia, stands alongside them. Steven Russell finds out who she was

THE metropolitan set might have East Anglia down as a sleepy backwater where they come periodically to shake the city grime out of their hair but the region does do detective writers rather well, so it can't all be somnolent. PD James and Ruth Rendell have found Suffolk an inspiring haven in recent times, and Dorothy L Sayers - creator of Lord Peter Wimsey - spent more than 25 years in Witham. Then there's the prolific Margery Allingham. She gave us the detective Albert Campion, portrayed on TV 20 years ago by the actor Peter Davison, and, says the chairman of The Margery Allingham Society, "remains one of the most diverting and alluring of mystery novelists, zestful in narrative and dialogue, and supremely devious in her designs". Barry Pike adds "not for nothing was she compared to Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson".

Margery Allingham was born in west London in 1904 but quickly became an adopted East Anglian. In 1909 parents Herbert and Em, both freelance writers of fiction, rented the Old Rectory at Layer Breton and Margery went to school in Colchester. They went back to London during the war, but spent holidays in a rented house at West Mersea.

In 1926 Herbert and Em moved to the Old Vicarage at Letheringham, near Framlingham. "It was partly an economy move, because you could rent old vicarages for very little," says biographer Julia Jones. The following year Margery married Pip Youngman Carter and they set up home in a London flat.



Margery pictured at her writing desk in Tolleshunt D'Arcy

In 1928 the recently-marrieds and the senior Allinghams temporarily swapped homes for a holiday.

It was on one of those holidays that Margery, fed to write what she wanted to write, created Albert Campion. He made his bow in *The Crime at Black Dudley*, written at Letheringham. “So he's Suffolk-born - and that, I feel, is a little-celebrated fact!”

The following year Margery's second novel, *Mystery Mile*, was also written in Letheringham. Her parents later moved across Suffolk to Shelley, near Hadleigh. It was there, in 1930, that the author wrote most of *Look to the Lady*.

Police at the Funeral was also written at Shelley. That year, 1931, saw Margery and Pip move to Viaduct Farm at Chappel, between Colchester and Halstead. Then in 1935 they moved to D'Arcy House, an elegant Georgian property in Tolleshunt D'Arcy, near Maldon. She'd spend the rest of her days there, until her death in 1966 at the age of 62.



Margery pictured in the 1950's

Does that comparison with Dickens and Stevenson hold water? Biographer Julia Jones, who lives near Great Dunmow, has no doubts.

“I think Margery's very best books are the little sequence in London after the Second World War - More Work for the Undertaker, The Tiger in the Smoke and Hide My Eyes. Tiger in the Smoke, for instance, has a consciously Dickensian feel, with the description of the fog in London, and you think of the beginning of Bleak House.”

Did critics and readers give her her due when she was alive, and do we now?

“I think it's both a blessing and a disadvantage that she's always linked with Christie and Sayers, because she's a different sort of writer - particularly when compared to Christie. On the other hand, that's how she gets remembered, because people say 'Christie, Sayers, Allingham and Marsh, wasn't it?' when they think of golden age detective novelists.” (Ngaio Marsh created the character Roderick Alleyn.)

“That was useful, because publishers and booksellers like labels; they like to know on which shelves to put things. Margery might write the same 'book' twice, but never more. So you get huge disparities between one book and the next.

“But Allingham-ites are still happy, because they've got a series character. There's Campion, all the way through, whatever happens. He does change, though. Margery used Campion as her viewpoint. As Margery gets older and thinks more about the world, so Campion gets older and thinks more about the world.”

Julia's appreciation of the writer grew years ago when she owned a bookshop near Chelmsford and heard about The Oaken Heart, Allingham's only published work of non-fiction. It explained about the upheaval in small communities like Tolleshunt D'Arcy during the Second World War. “I realised, through the writing, that I liked Margery very much as a person. She really rolled up her sleeves and got down to organising things like where billeted soldiers were going to dig their latrines!”

Through her own bookshop-related publishing arm, Julia issued a new edition of the book in the late 1980s.

She met Margery's sister, Joyce, who had come to D'Arcy in 1955 when Margery had a breakdown, and would live in the village until her own death in 2001. Julia and Joyce became friends - they had a happy time sorting out Herbert Allingham's papers - and Julia wrote Margery Allingham: A Biography. It was published by Heinemann in 1991 and an updated version has just come out.

While life was successful for Margery on the professional front, and while D'Arcy was the scene of sociable house-parties and village cricket, things weren't always so cheerful personally.

“It was Joyce's experience of reading Margery's diaries after Margery had died that alerted her to the fact her sister hadn't been very happy, within the marriage and also within her body: because she became so huge. Towards the end of Margery's life, Joyce had had to compulsorily commit her to Severalls hospital [in Colchester], which was a horrible thing to have to do, because Joyce was so desperate for Margery to get help.”

Julia thinks the author probably suffered bipolar depression for most of her life, as well as a thyroid imbalance.

“She knew about it in herself. I've been able to read more of a particular set of letters that she wrote to a man” - Russell Meiggs, an eccentric historian and Oxford don - “in the later 1930s. It turned out he was also someone who suffered from bipolar depression.”

The relationship between Margery and Meiggs was intense, but Julia thinks it highly unlikely it stretched to a physical affair. But their affinity was helpful because the author could talk openly about fear and depression and despair.”

And husband Pip wasn't a good listening ear?

“No! There's a little episode after Margery had come out of Severalls, and she had [breast] cancer, and the mental problems were exacerbated by her thyroid imbalance. Joyce said they went to huge lengths to prevent Pip being 'inconvenienced' by this. That was Joyce's word: 'inconvenienced' . . . by his wife's terminal illness! But it was Margery who didn't want Pip to be discommoded. Pip didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to acknowledge it. I don't think he liked that side of Margery.

“I think it was the imaginative and rather weird side that Pip couldn't cope with. Pip was a very talented person, but a very conventional person, and Margery, in the nicest sense of the word, was a bit bonkers. That's why she's such an exceptional writer.”

Illustrator Pip, who designed the “wrappers” for many of his wife's books, has earned a bad press over the years - not least because of his frequent philandering. Julia warns against rushing to judgment. “I think it would be very easy to be very damning about Pip, and that wouldn't be right. Margery stuck with Pip, and although she knew his faults better than anybody else, she still found something there she wanted to be loyal to. One has to keep remembering that.”

The Tiger in the Smoke is often held up as Allingham's best tale. It's not her biographer's favourite, though she recognises its psychological edge. Instead, Julia plumps for the bleak Hide My Eyes, in which a quiet, ruthless killer is on the prowl in London's theatreland. “That's the one written after she's come out of her ECT (electroconvulsive therapy) and didn't know if she could write anymore. It's a book about a rather stupid but very nice woman who consistently refuses to see the monster that is the villain.

“It is a time when Margery knew she was refusing to see all the bad things about Pip. Obviously, with fiction and life you have to be very careful about how you draw your analogies, but I think there's enough evidence to show that Margery saw things in her own life and transmuted them for her fiction.”

She feels Allingham's work is enjoying fresh popularity. Vintage Books - which has made her Author of the Month - has reissued her works in retro packaging.

“Margery is a supremely stylish writer with an individual, not to say idiosyncratic, view of life. Her language is allusive and metaphorical, with frequent shrewd and humorous asides. Occasionally this can slow the narrative action, as she recognised herself when she took 29,000 words out of her 1938 novel The Fashion in Shrouds when it was re-published for a new readership in the mid 1960s. In characteristic language she said that she found 'too many carefully-hemmed turnings, not to mention feather-stitching, all the way down the seams'.”

The Adventures of Margery Allingham is available from www.golden-duck.co.uk at £14.99. ISBN 978-1-899262-01-4. As part of the Essex Book Festival, Julia is speaking at West Mersea Library on March 11. Box office: 01206 573948. Web: www.essexbookfestival.org.uk