

Where to begin reading Margery Allingham?

What an alluring question. How I envy readers this treat in store ...

To begin at the beginning is usually sound advice and, with Margery Allingham's 'Campion' novels, beginning at the beginning offers the additional interest of seeing how experimental and adventurous she was as a writer. All are composed within the detective 'box' (as she called it) but there's a world of difference between the goofy Wodehousian spree in *Mystery Mile* (1930) and the intellectual questioning of new communication methods in *The Mind Readers* (1965). Both books are set in deserted stretches of the East Anglian coast line but there's more than half a lifetime of imaginative experience and writerly development in between. (I have excluded *The Crime At Black Dudley* (1929) and *Cargo of Eagles* (1968) from my first-to-last recommendation because *Black Dudley* was written when Allingham was still uncertain about the identity of her protagonist and *Cargo of Eagles* was completed after her death.)

If a chronological approach doesn't appeal, then readers can select according to taste. For bright foolery in rural settings pick *Mystery Mile* or *Sweet Danger* (1934); for greater depth of characterisation and the flavour of a mid-nineteen-thirties artistic household as well as a plot where relationships really matter, try *Dancers in Mourning* (1937). The novelist A.S. Byatt identified the wartime thriller *Traitor's Purse* (1941) as her personal favourite whereas I hesitate between the rich eccentricity of *More Work for the Undertaker* (1948) and the bleak psychological tension of *Hide My Eyes* (1958).

Tiger in the Smoke (1952) is Margery Allingham's most famous novel. It's a bold, almost epic confrontation of good and evil in the choking fog of a post-war, post-Dickensian London. *Tiger in the Smoke* removes the central element of puzzle from the plot – the reader is never in any doubt whose hand is wielding the knife – but Allingham intensifies the suspense in a way that anticipates some of the best crime-writing of today.

Allingham is a detective novelists' detective novelist. From Agatha Christie to P.D. James and Sara Paretsky her fellow-writers have praised her style and technique. But she was also a big personality; warm and witty, intellectually acute and imaginatively generous. These qualities permeate her fiction and keep her readers loyal. On reflection I don't really envy the readers who are currently poised to discover Allingham. I began reading the Campions when I was an undergraduate and now, more than thirty years on, I'm a grandparent and the books have stuck by me throughout. When I re-visited them recently for the new edition of my biography I discovered two of my least favourite volumes (naming no names) were far better than I'd remembered. I think it's because this series of novels is itself the record of a life. I've changed over the years, as we do, so it's unsurprising that there are aspects of the mature Allingham that I now read differently.

The only advice I can sincerely offer to new readers is don't dither for too long. The novelist Jane Stevenson says that the Margery Allinghams on her bookshelf are the novels most likely to be filched when weekend guests return home. To avoid being tempted into such criminous acts buy now or hasten to your local library.

Julia Jones

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