



Overture to Death

Ngaio Marsh

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Amateur actors set the stage for murder...

Who in the quiet village of Chipping would kill wealthy spinster Idris Campanula? Plenty of people, among them her fellow cast members from a troubled charity production. Miss Campanula was a spiteful gossip, gleefully destroying others' lives merely for her won excitement. But once Inspector Roderick Alleyn arrives, he quickly realizes that the murderer might have killed the wrong woman-and may soon stage a repeat performance...

Overture to Death Details

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Ivonne Rovira says

Those familiar with Ngaio Marsh and her Roderick Alleyn novels know that her writing style isn't the frenzied roller-coaster ride so popular today. She takes her time letting you know her characters and slyly sending up the upper classes of her day. However, in *Overture to Death*, four or five chapters slip by simply exploring the petty machinations of two village harpies: a pair of gossipy, spiteful, meddlesome spinsters without equal. The endless focus of these parodies of the malicious spinster droned on so long that I nodded off several times. While sometimes humorous, a lot less of Eleanor Prentice and Idris Campanula would have gone a long way in helping speed the pace a bit.

Once past the lengthy exposition and when the overbearing Miss Campanula gets what's coming to her and Alleyn comes on the scene, however, the novel picks up quite a bit. I recommend the book to Marsh fans like myself; however, those who make *Overture to Death* their first taste of Marsh are unlikely to be back for seconds. Newcomers are better off starting with *A Man Lay Dead*, *Artists in Crime*, or *Death In A White Tie*.

Sophie Hannah says

Well written, engaging, very detailed...but the pacing wasn't quite right. It seemed quite repetitive and longer than it needed to be. An enjoyable Golden Age mystery, but lacking that touch of magic that you get with Agatha Christie. Somehow not quite gripping enough.

FangirlNation says

Detective Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn goes to the small village of Chipping in 1939's *Overture to Death*, published during the height of Ngaio Marsh's heyday. The local church really needs a new piano, so a group of eight local citizens gets together to raise money for a new piano by putting on a play. Two middle-aged spinsters, Idris Campanula and Eleanor Prentice, embody the modern term "frienemies," heads always together in gossip against the rest of the world, but backbiting at each other in private and fighting over the affections of the widowed Rector Copeland. Eleanor Prentice lives with her brother-in-law, the someone dense Squire Jocelyn Jouningham, and his son, Henry, who is in love with Dinah Copeland, daughter of the rector and a young lady trying to make her way on the London stage. Both the squire and rector oppose the marriage of this young couple, the squire because Dinah does not have money and the rector because of what Dinah calls reverse snobbery, concern that she's trying to reach above her station. The final pair consists of Dr. Template and Mrs. Celia Ross, a new resident of Chipping with a suspicious background and with whom it seems apparent that Dr. Template, the husband of an invalid, has been having an affair.

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Miriam says

I have developed a theory regarding the appeal of these "golden age" British mysteries: every character is so poisonous and hateful that one is freed from any concern for their fates or sadness about the fictional death and suffering.

This installment is set just before Alleyn's marriage, but sadly Troy does not feature.

Nikki says

It's a solidly entertaining mystery, I suppose, aware of the genre and making sly little jokes at its expense. It doesn't really sparkle, though; I felt that the culprit was made obvious by their behaviour, and not just because they acted guilty — also because they had that whole cliché Freudian repressed sexuality going on, which seems to crop up in crime fiction of that period far too much. *Gaudy Night* is another example, though it does sparkle, because of the character development that's going on too. In this one, despite his engagement, and the appearance of some regular characters, it isn't really about Alleyn or development of him or the minor characters. In fact, the POV characters are pretty much two young lovers who we may not even see again.

The repressed sexuality stuff is worthy of an eyeroll, but the machinations of the murder set-up are quite interesting to follow. It gets a bit repetitive, and does that irritating holding-back-of-details that means you can't solve the crime for yourself (or, in this case, be sure about it), but as a murder mystery it's alright. I just hope somebody kicks Alleyn into a higher gear...

Originally posted [here](#).

Leslie says

Wanda McCaddon (who also narrates under the names Donada Peters and Nadia May) was perfect for this Golden Age mystery.

August 2017: Very enjoyable even knowing the solution. I could appreciate how well Marsh gives the reader a the clues without making it obvious.

Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says

At first I thought, oh yum, village theatricals! Always a hotbed of discontent, of course you expect everyone to have their knives into everyone else, but shooting someone in the head is a little extreme! Unfortunately, Marsh was soon riding her psychological hobbyhorse round and round, and trust me--the old grey mare just ain't what she used to be. I get miffed when "lady writers" sell out their own sex by blaming everything from obsessive housecleaning to--well, murderous impulses--on thwarted sexuality. And yet they all do it. Christie, Sayers, Mitchell, and now Marsh, who goes so far as to repeatedly use the term "hysteria" in its Victorian sense. Then there's the "man's woman", by which Marsh means the sultry temptress who chases

anything in pants with her husky voice and seductive glances. That cost it a star.

The other star was removed because of the tell-not-show recap in the last chapter. If you've written well, it's not necessary--readers are not stupid. I was also heartily sick of Nigel Bathgate in this volume, and I got the feeling Alleyn was, too. I missed his mum, though.

Patricia Vocat says

Wow... this took forever to finish...

Overture to Death has all what I look for in a Mystery novel: It is very atmospheric, very British, steeped in the time period it is set in, oh, and possibly a little stereotypical. But still it made my eyes glaze over every time I read a couple of pages.

The petty machinations of the two village harpies are quite entertaining. Marsh takes her time letting you know her characters and slyly pokes fun at the upper classes. Nonetheless the group of people remain more stereotypical than realistic. The method of the murder is a bit fantastic and, worse it was a bit too easy to figure out the culprit.

On the bright side, Marsh's skillful writing style isn't the frenzied roller-coaster ride so popular today.

Shauna says

This book was published in 1939 and it shows. The plot involves the murder of an unpopular but rich middle-aged spinster and a cast of very unlikeable suspects indeed. Ngaio Marsh, despite being a spinster herself, is very keen to push all the stereotypes of the time surrounding unmarried women of a certain age. They are narrow-minded, hysterical, sexually repressed, bitter harpies. It is a constant in the story and one which left a very unsavoury taste in my mouth. I think it is my least favourite of the Roderick Alleyn series.

Bev says

When reading the synopsis for Overture to Death (1939) by Ngaio Marsh, one can be excused for thinking that this will be another of her theatrical mysteries. After all, it tells us that a group of seven amateur actors are preparing to put on the play Shop Windows when Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C Sharp Minor" is set for the overture. Then on opening night the pianist barely gets started--playing three chords and then stepping on soft pedal--before a loud bang is heard and Miss Idris Campanula falls dead against the sheet music. There's no performance and the play setting itself features very little in the plot other than to provide a way for Marsh to insert a rather ingenious method of murder. I'm quite sure I'd never come across a deadly piano before I read this one the first time (long ago and far way from our local library).

The stars of Marsh's show are Miss Campanula and her bosom friend Miss Eleanor Prentice, two embittered old maids who like nothing more than to spread dreadful rumors about their neighbors and then confess their sins to the handsome rector. Of course, the dear friends are also rivals for the rector's regard--each woman imagining herself to be the front-runner in the "rector's wife" stakes. When Inspector Roderick Alleyn arrives on the scene to decide who gave Miss Campanula such a dramatic death scene, he finds that he must first

discover if the murderer has cast the right woman as victim. For until about twenty minutes or so before curtain time, everyone assumed that Miss Prentice would be playing her standard piece as the opening. She is prevented from doing so by an infected finger and only agrees to give up her martyr's determination to play no matter how much it hurt after the rector convinces her. There seems to have been no time for the gun to have been rigged up in the piano after the change in pianists took place--so was Miss Prentice the intended victim? And what was the motive? Do people really kill just because someone is a meddling, gossipy busybody?

This was an enjoyable entry in the Alleyn case files. A cast of interesting characters from repressed village spinsters and the handsome cleric to the county squire and the young lovers (whose parents are forbidding the match) to the doctor and his adulterous love interest, the attractive widow; a clever murder method; a heaping helping of red herrings (some provided courtesy of the young scamp George Biggins; and plenty of humor and excellent dialogue. Alleyn does an amusing turn as Holmes and we (blessedly) see little of Nigel Bathgate (I am getting a bit tired of Mr. Bathgate). Great fun even though I remembered who the culprit is. ★★★ and a half. (rounded to four here)

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Bill says

I do love the Roderick Alleyn mysteries. I've read the first 8 so far, with Overture to Death by Ngaio Marsh being the 8th one, plus a couple of others further down the line. They do seem to get better and better. The mysteries are always interesting. In this story, an unpopular woman is murdered in a most interesting way. Was she the target or another? Alleyn and his team, the steady, constant Inspector Fox and his friend, news reporter Nigel Bathgate, accompany Alleyn to Pen Cuckoo at the behest of the local authorities as they are busy trying to sort out a series of robberies. I love the investigation, the interviews with the various characters. I also like how Marsh develops the story, leading up the murder before even bringing Alleyn into the picture, about half way through the story. There is nice humour, there are lovely touches (I'm thinking of late in the story when Alleyn writes a letter to his beloved, Troy. The whole story is a joy to read and hard to put down. Excellent series and excellent story. (4 stars)

Carol ?? says

"It's like one of those affairs in books," said Bailey disgustedly. "Someone trying to think up a new way to do a murder. Silly, I call it."

"What do you say, Roper?" said Alleyn.

"To my way of thinking, sir," said Sergeant Roper, "these thrillers are ruining our criminal classes."

The humour in this novel (Miss Marsh's 8th Alleyn title) is its saving grace. That and some excellent

dialogue. This book has a slow (and quite dull) start, Nigel Bathgate (the world's most annoying Watson) and (view spoiler)

This is a Marsh I haven't read before and I'm quite sure I won't read again.

Subashini says

Beware! Anti-spinster propaganda.

Gerry says

Pom! Pom! Pom! Three notes sounded from the piano. As the third one died away a shot rang out and a murder was committed in a sleepy English village where the inhabitants enjoyed their gossip and illicit love affairs.

The local bobby was deemed incapable of solving the crime without the help of Chief Inspector Alleyn of Scotland Yard. He duly arrives with his trusty assistants and Nigel Bathgate, his faithful Watson.

He interviews all the suspects and, in turn, it appears as though each of them could just have committed the crime. But who actually did do it? Alleyn is probably the only one who knows and he keeps it to himself, naturally, until the final few pages when he reveals the culprit in an eminently readable novel in which he also maintains a little love interest of his own!

Susan says

When a group of worth locals decide to put on some amateur theatricals, in order to raise money for a new piano, it inflames local passions, jealousies and insecurities. Our cast include the local Squire, Jocelyn Journingham, his cousin, Eleanor, his son, Henry, who is in love with the Rector's daughter, Dinah, her father, Rector Copeland – a man adored by the two local, gossipy spinsters, Cousin Eleanor and Idris Campanula, the local doctor, Dr Template, whose wife is an invalid and the attractive widow, Mrs Celia Ross, who is rumoured to be having affair with the doctor.

Eleanor and Idris are united in their disapproval of much of the behaviour they come across in others, but compete for the attentions of the rector. Idris is a wealthy woman, while Eleanor is the 'poor relation,' and reliant upon Jocelyn's goodwill. When Henry and Dinah fall in love, it would weaken Eleanor's position and so she is determined to do all she can to stop the match. Jealousy, greed, love and fear are all involved in this crime, which results in Idris Campanula being shot dead by an ingenious method, which could be found only in Golden Age mysteries. However, although Miss Campanula was the victim, was she the intended victim?

Published in 1939, this is the eight in the Inspector Roderick Alleyn series. I am greatly enjoying this series and loved listening to this audio version, as Alleyn, Fox and Nigel Bathgate, undercover the reasons for murder in a small village hall. The cast are colourful, the number of possible suspects and the crime itself give a number of possibilities to solve the murder. The two, spiteful spinsters, Cousin Eleanor and Idris Campanula, jar somewhat with modern ears. There is a reliance on the idea of women considered 'Old

Maids,' being repressed sexually, like Eleanor and Idris, or vampish seducers, such as Mrs Ross. Still, overall, a good read and a series I look forward to continuing.
