

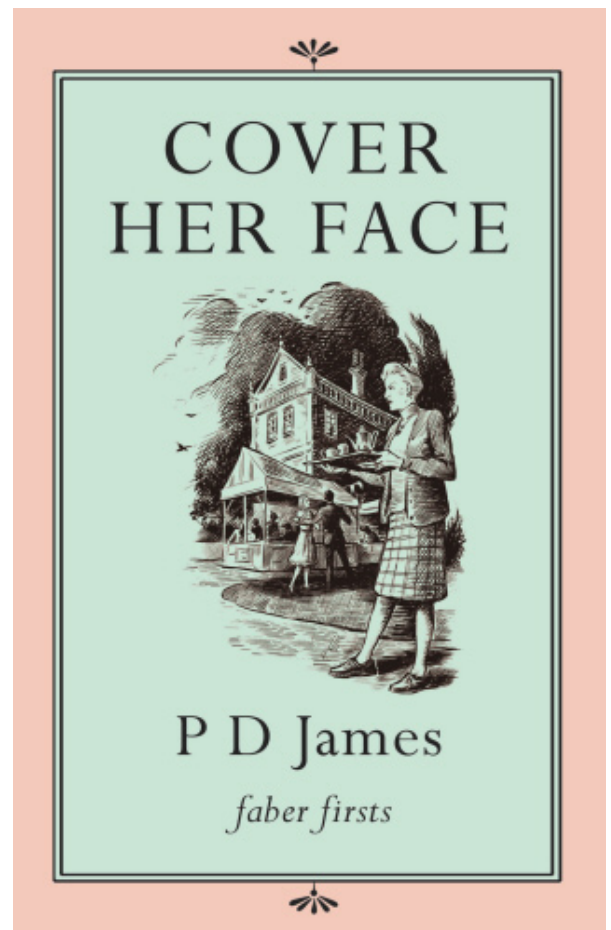
Faber Firsts

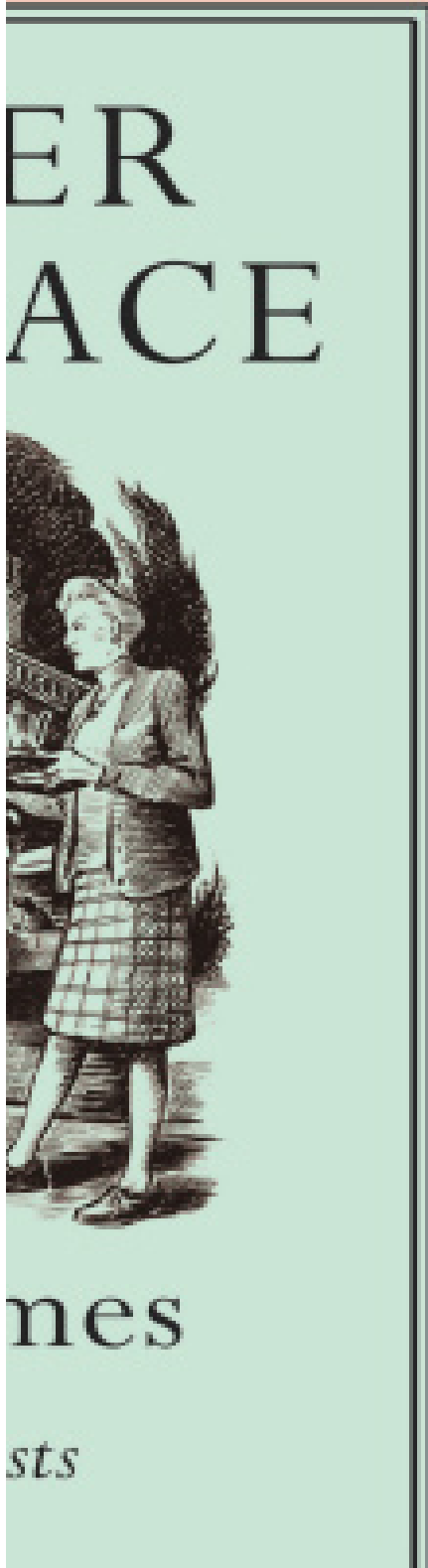
Cover Her Face by P. D. James

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Cover Her Face by P. D. James In brief

First published in 1962, *Cover Her Face* introduces readers to Detective Chief Inspector Adam Dalgleish, the introspective, artistically sensitive detective who goes on to feature in most of PD James' now-bestselling crime novels. Set in the fictional yet idyllic English village of Chadfleet largely on the day of St Cedd's Church fête, its crime is the murder of young single mother Sally Jupp. Ambitious, steely and apparently unashamed of her unmarried status, Jupp causes tensions between the villagers which only worsen when she is found dead the next morning. The plot sees Dalgleish conducting a thorough, methodical investigation until the killer is unveiled via a process of elimination. James's clear, crisp style is as measured as it is unnerving, and combined with her insight into what initially seem like English whodunit caricatures – but ultimately are not – opened the door for a fresh, literary type of crime fiction.





Background

Written on the train to work when PD James worked for the National Health Service, her debut heralded a new standard for crime fiction, allowing the genre to be perceived as something more than a narrative-driven pot-boilers but to have literary ambitions as well.

As the novel opens, what will become the cast of key suspects are gathered together for a dinner party where the forthcoming Church fête is being discussed. The hostess is Mrs Eleanor Maxie, whose husband is terminally ill upstairs. Her children Stephen Maxie and Deborah Riscoe are also present, as well as a spectrum of traditional village characters such as the vicar and the doctor. Serving at the party is Mrs Maxie's new maid Sally Jupp, who has recently come to the household from the nearby St Mary's refuge for Girls as she is an unmarried mother of a young baby boy. This prompts a discussion about the morals of women who find themselves in such 'predicaments' and how much help they deserve, which highlights certain characteristics and attitudes of the guests present.

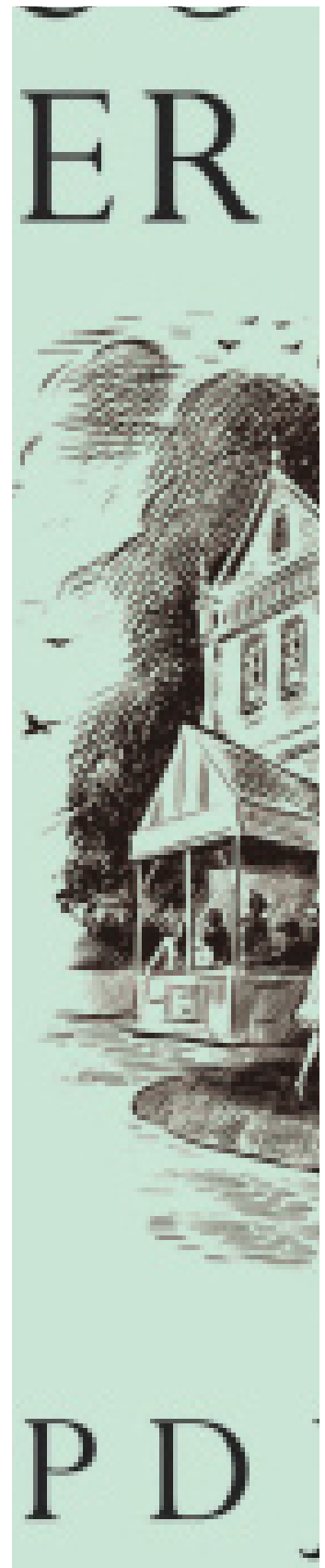
As the novel develops, Sally is revealed to be a confident, perhaps even manipulative character who seems to be deliberately goading members of the family and village. This reaches a peak when, on the evening of the Church fête, she announces that she has accepted a proposal of marriage from Stephen Maxie and as such is no longer part of the serving class in the household. The next morning she is found dead.

Each of the characters has reason to be either antagonised or threatened by Sally Jupp and her actions. In investigating these, Dalgleish reveals both suppressed emotion and dormant prejudices in all involved. The intricate hierarchies of both the English class system and the traditional household are unmasked, as well as the fact that World War Two is still casting a long shadow over several of the characters.

Written at a time when England was on the cusp of undergoing huge social change, as the austerity and deprivations of World War Two gave way to the prosperity and sexual revolution of the 'Swinging Sixties', *Cover Her Face* perfectly illustrates the way that these shifts in attitude were affecting different strata of society. At the same time, it follows the conventions of the classic detective novel, ensuring that it functions as a page-turner as well as an incisive snapshot of an age.

For discussion

- How does PD James create a sense of suspense in the opening chapters of the novel? The jacket reveals who the murder victim will be, but there is still a sense of tension: how is this achieved?
- Each of the characters in the novel has reason to be a suspect. Do you think that this device enhances the readers' understanding of the characters, or that it is too obvious a plot device?
- PD James' novels usually take place in apparently genteel society, but ultimately explore the darker side to people. What examples of this are there in *Cover Her Face*?
- It could be said that in this case the victim has brought about her own death through her own vanity and manipulation. Do you agree with this? Do you think that this is the point PD James was making?
- Mr Maxie is upstairs, terminally ill, for almost the entire novel. Do you think that this adds to the narrative in any way other than to create the plot point regarding his drugs? Does his situation add to the reader's understanding of the characters at all?
- The effects of World War 2 are clearly seen on at least one of the characters in the novel. Are there any other examples of crime novels where those who suffered during the war are under suspicion as a plot point?
- Can you imagine if this novel was written or set in a different era? Would it be as effective, or interesting?
- On p84 Dalglish is referred to as 'the cultured cop'. What else has been done to bring the detective to life? Do you find him credible, or a man who is enjoyable to read about?
- PD James has said in interview that 'detectives are far less creatures of fantasy or romantic wish-fulfilment. They tend to be professionals doing a difficult job in a modern world.' How is this reflected in her characterisation of Dalglish?
- Do you get a sense that PD James was aware that she was beginning the first in a series of novels in this case? Are there any 'clues' that suggest Dalglish will be back, or what the future might hold for him?
- PD James has a great deal of experience of working in various British bureaucracies. How is this reflected in the novel?
- In crime novels, there is often a case of simple conflict between good and evil. Do you believe that this novel follows to this pattern? Are there any examples of characters or situations within it that are more complicated than that?
- PD James' novels are often credited with having a sense of social realism, of dealing with larger social or political issues beyond the case itself. Do you believe that this is the case with *Cover Her Face*?

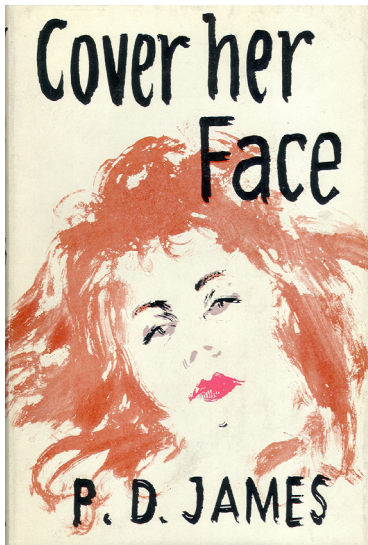


About the author

PD James was born in Oxford in 1920, to an official at the Inland Revenue. She was educated at Cambridge High School for Girls and worked for the National Health Service and the Civil Service – for the Home Office, the Police Department and the Criminal Policy Department - until she became a full time writer in 1979.

She has also been a Governor for the BBC (1988 – 1993), is a Lay Patron of the Prayer Book Society, and was made a Life Peer (Baroness James of Holland Park) in 1991, as well as being a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and of the Royal Society of Arts. She has been awarded several major prizes both in the UK and abroad.

She lives in London and Oxford and has two daughters, five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.



Resources

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth193>

PD James' page at British Council Contemporary Writers site

http://www.salon.com/books/int/1998/02/cov_si_26int.html

1998 Salon interview

Suggested further reading

Fiction

The Moonstone – Wilkie Collins

A Man Lay Dead - Ngaio Marsh

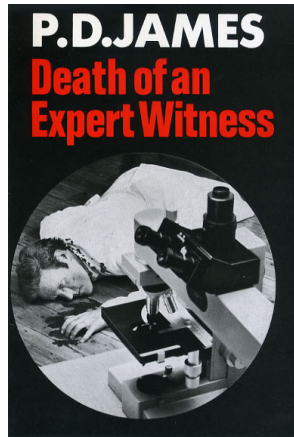
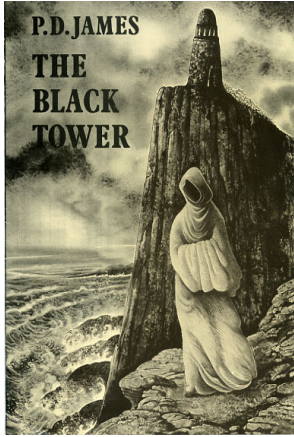
Last Bus to Woodstock - Colin Dexter

The Ice House - Minette Walters

Whose Body? - Dorothy L Sayers

A Great Deliverance - Elizabeth George

The Remorseful Day - Colin Dexter



Other books by P. D. James

Fiction

A Mind to Murder (1963)
Unnatural Causes (1967)
Shroud for a Nightingale (1971)
An Unsuitable Job for a Woman (1972)
The Black Tower (1975)
Death of an Expert Witness (1977)
Innocent Blood (1980)
The Skull Beneath the Skin (1982)
A Taste for Death (1986)
Devices and Desires (1989)
The Children of Men (1992)
Original Sin (1994)
A Certain Justice (1997)
Death in Holy Orders (2001)
The Murder Room (2003)
The Lighthouse (2005)
The Private Patient (2008)

Non-Fiction

The Maul and the Pear Tree: The Ratcliffe Highway Murders, 1811, with Thomas A. Critchley (1971)
Time to Be in Earnest - autobiography (2000)

