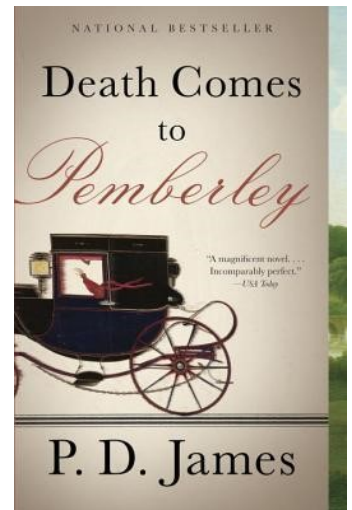


# *Death comes to Pemberley*

P. D. James

The greatest pleasure of this novel is its unforced, effortless, effective voice. James hasn't written in florid cod-Regency whorls, the overblown language other mimics so often employ. Not infrequently, while reading *Death Comes to Pemberley*, one succumbs to the impression that it is [Jane] Austen herself at the keyboard.

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/books/review/death-comes-to-pemberley-by-p-d-james-book-review.html>]



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## A Brief Author Biography



### Early years

P. D. James was born Phyllis Dorothy James on August 3, 1920, in Oxford, England, the oldest of three children. Her parents, Sidney Victor, a tax official, and Dorothy May (Hone) James, moved to Cambridge, England, where Phyllis attended the Cambridge High School for Girls. Phyllis liked Cambridge and even used the city as the location for one of her books, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*.

Phyllis had to leave school at age sixteen to work. The family did not have much money and her father did not believe in higher education for girls. Dorothy worked in a tax office for three years. Later she found a job as an

assistant stage manager for a theater group. In 1941 she married Ernest Connor Bantry White, an army doctor, and had two daughters, Claire and Jane.

When White returned from World War II, he suffered from a mental illness and was not able to get a job. James was forced to provide for the whole family until her husband's death in 1964. James studied hospital administration (management), and from 1949 to 1968 she worked for a hospital board in London, England.

### Early novels

James was in her early forties when her first novel, *Cover Her Face*, was published in 1962. Her personal and professional

experience helped to develop her powers of observation and thought. These aided her in both her description of police detective work and her portrayal of characters.

In 1968 James passed an examination that qualified her for a government job. She eventually worked in the Crime Department (1972–79) in London.

James's work served as a basis for her novels, giving them backgrounds for both medical and police procedures (official ways of working). The settings of several of her mysteries, including *A Mind to Murder* (1962), *Shroud for a Nightingale* (1971), and *Death of an Expert Witness* (1977), are in

medicine-related locations. In all of these novels she is just as interested in examining the relationships among people as she is in telling a mystery story.

James wrote some of her works in the tradition of the British crime storyteller as represented by such authors as Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) and Agatha Christie (1891–1976). These are stories that have sometimes been referred to as "polite mysteries." However, James also wrote about motivations, explored relationships between people, examined ideas about guilt and innocence, and questioned both the legal system and religion.

### **Experimentation with the mystery form**

James's work is distinguished (special) not only for its quality of plot, setting, and character, but also for its experimentation with the mystery form. Her first novel, *Cover Her Face* (1962), is similar to the stories written by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, but James began to experiment with new plots and new types of characters. She has written about questions of social privilege (special rights), politics, aesthetics (the theory of beauty and art), and theology (the study of religion). In her novel *The Children of Men* (1993) she experimented with science fiction.

Because James brought such new ideas to the mystery story, many people have chosen to classify

James not as a crime author, but as a novelist. James herself says that she uses the detective story to comment on men, women, and society. In an interview published in the *New York Times* in 1986, she said that she would "sacrifice ... the detective element" in her work if it would make a better novel.

Some critics are unhappy with James's concern with the psychology of her characters. These people would rather have a book that simply tells a basic detective story and gives the solution.

Even so, the qualities condemned by one group are prized by another. James is well respected and she has received many awards for her literary achievements.

### **Main characters**

Most of James's books involve one of two characters: Adam Dalgliesh, a police inspector in Scotland Yard (London's police headquarters) and a published poet; and Cordelia Gray, a young private detective introduced in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1972). In addition to their own individual mysteries, Dalgliesh and Gray appear together in some of the books.

### **James today**

To date P. D. James has published fourteen books and many short stories. She was awarded the Order of the

British Empire (OBE) in 1983 and was made a baroness in 1991. She also served on the governor's board of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC). She continues to have loyal fans who enjoy both a good mystery and a well-written novel.

James died at her home in Oxford on 27 November 2014, aged 94. She is survived by her two daughters, Clare and Jane, five grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

[<https://www.notablebiographies.com/Ho-Jo/James-P-D.html>]

[[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P.\\_D.\\_James](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P._D._James)]

## PD James: inside the head of a criminal mastermind

At 10 o'clock PD James – or Baroness James of Holland Park, OBE – walks into her sitting room. We last met almost 20 years ago in the same room and there is, along with the *deja vu*, a sense of wonder at seeing her again. At 91, she is remarkable. She is looking marvellous in an elegant powder-blue jacket of oriental cut, offset by a narrow silk scarf decorated with flowers. She is frailer than when last we met (she has survived heart failure and had a hip replaced in 2007) but otherwise is unchanged and in no way extinguished. She is as kind, civil and forthright as I remember. Her secretary, friend and all-round prop, Joyce McLennan, has tea and biscuits ready on the table. Everything is in order – above all, PD James's shipshape mind. Incidentally, P and D stand for Phyllis and Dorothy.

It is splendid, she volunteers, to be answering questions from readers and fellow authors. She avoids being insulting yet her view is implicit: journalists are less likely to be armed with surprising questions. As a crime writer, surprise is PD James's forte. Her ability to keep readers guessing has not failed her in half a century. And it is characteristic that, towards the end of her writing life, she should elect to spring a new surprise on us. It would have been pardonable – admirable indeed – to have published another novel starring policeman poet Adam Dalgliesh. But *Death Comes to Pemberley* (now out in paperback) is a plucky new adventure, a sequel to Jane

Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that doubles as a murder novel.

PD James has been an Austen devotee all her life. She can hear Austen's voice with her inner ear, become her echo on the page. *Death Comes to Pemberley* is a masterly pastiche. It is more streamlined than her other fiction, involving only one murder and one suspect, but it fills us in on Elizabeth and Darcy and their marriage and satisfies that curiosity one has as the reader of a classic romance: did they live happily ever after?

And what of PD James's own happiness? Everything about the room and its occupant has a secure, reassuring feel: the William Morris upholstery, the trusty fireplace, the sage green walls, a flourishing orchid and statues – some of them religious. She has a study lined with poetry, a garden busy with geraniums, but the metal security bars on the windows introduce a different note. She prefers not to dwell on her earlier life's difficulties. But it is interesting that, asked about what matters, she talks – in a manner of which Jane Austen would have approved – about the importance of security and a good marriage when, for a while, she had neither.

She was married to Connor Bantry White, an army doctor, and had two daughters by him: Clare and Jane. Tragically, her husband returned from the war mentally ill – and she had to

support the family single-handedly. He died, aged 44, in 1964, two years after her first novel, *Cover Her Face*, was published. It must have been extraordinarily hard. But PD James is, one surmises, the sort of person who would only be made more determined by misfortune. Besides, she was not unused to being pitched into helping a family out. For, in a sense, history was repeating itself. She left school at 16 and helped bring up her younger siblings. Her family was short of money and her father, a tax inspector, did not approve of higher education for girls. And there was another reason too: her mother had been admitted to a mental hospital.

PD James has always been a powerhouse. As if it were not enough to be a living legend as a crime writer, she also worked (until 1979) in the NHS and Home Office police and criminal law department. She is a Conservative life peer and has been a magistrate, a BBC governor, on the board of the Arts Council, a chair of the Booker prize, a lay patron of the Prayer Book Society. Idleness is alien to her. And while, in one sense, she could be seen as a distinguished, conservative, C of E pillar of the community, there is another in which she cannot be defined through any institution. That is not to say she is not intrigued by institutions – they are an essential part of her writing (a theological college, a publishing house, a barristers' chambers, the

criminal justice system – each has a novel to itself). But PD James is, above all, an independent thinker.

On New Year's Eve 2009, she attracted widespread attention by giving that independent thought air time. It was while guest editing the Today programme that she took on the BBC's director general, Mark Thompson, and politely asked him bullseye questions. She wanted to know why the BBC's middle management were paid such overblown salaries and why creative people were not better recompensed. Thompson was not ready for her. The interview won the 2010 Nick Clarke award.

PD James has a special place in her readers' lives. When I explain to a friend we cannot meet because I am interviewing her, his response is: "Excuses don't come any better." And I feel hugely indebted to her because it was the Dalgliesh novels that saw me through the sleepless months after my first son was born. That magnificent narrative grip, the Victorian and the visceral together: the capaciousness coupled with violent detail... her books were powerful enough to keep even a shattered new mother reading. I had such an appetite for PD James's novels at that time that I did not want to read anyone else. I am still grateful now.

I think I am ready for her. She watches with concern as I turn on the tape recorder, explaining that she and machines do not get on.

As we sit side by side on the sofa, she is completely engaged: warm, careful and deliberate. She speaks as if she were dictating to a secretary. She turns each answer over, sometimes returning to it for tailoring – to add an extra twist or subtract where necessary – but always determined to do each question justice.

#### **Ask PD James: readers' questions**

**Jeffrey Archer** Are you a lark or an owl?

**PD James** I am a lark, we get up early in the morning, don't we? I always have woken terribly early. Usually about 5am. I can – and do – work as early as that but then I sleep for an hour in the afternoon. I am a siesta woman. I suppose you could say that, although I am a lark, I go back to the nest again in the afternoon.

**JA** How many rewrites do you do?

**PDJ** This is quite easy to answer: with some passages, absolutely none, whereas with others, I may have to rewrite a considerable number of times before I am satisfied. I know when a thing is not as good as I can make it. That is the point. Other people might be able to do it better but I have to make it the best I can do. And I sometimes feel it is not as good as I can make it. But when it is right you know. It is like with a

painting: you know, don't touch it again.

**Paula Byrne** With which character in Jane Austen do you identify yourself?

**PDJ** It has to be Elizabeth Bennet. I share her humour and irony and interest in other people and her wish to be well married. I have a similar enthusiasm for the security that is offered by family. Because we are always aware in *Pride and Prejudice* that although Mrs Bennet is, in many ways, a dreadful mum and embarrasses her elder daughters to a terrible extent, she is absolutely right that if Mr Bennet were to have got pneumonia – which they often did, the elderly – and if he had died of it in the winter or had fallen off his horse, the Bennets would have been thrown out of their house by the Collinses and would have had to live in a cottage on the estate. Mrs Bennet was absolutely right about security. I think I should also want the security of a prosperous marriage.

**Nicci French** Do crime novels always have a moral impulse?

**PDJ** No, not the most violent and sadistic of the crime novels but detective stories do affirm the sanctity of each individual life and the possibility of human justice.

**NF** Do you believe in good and evil in a Manichean way or do you see human nature as much more murky and ambiguous?



**PDJ** I believe in good and evil in a Manichean way. Evil is a positive force... to me, this seems close to human experience.

**NF** Are you scared of dying and does that inform your writing?

**PDJ** No, I am not afraid of death but I do fear the process of dying if it means prolonged pain, indignity and lack of independence. I make a strong distinction between death and dying. At over 90, I fear prolonged pain. And as to whether it informs my writing – it probably does but not in a way I am conscious of.

**Mike Stotter** Despite your love of Jane Austen's work, you chose to write in the crime genre. What drew you to the detective story?

**PDJ** I enjoyed reading them from childhood. I thought I could write one successfully and that it would stand a good chance of publication. I love structure in novels and am fascinated by communities of people: a publishing house, a nuclear power station, a theological college. I like studying community life.

**Ormskirkgirl** Why do you think there is a sudden appetite for Nordic crime? And are you a fan?

**PDJ** The stories are strong, the characters believable and the TV series are excellent. And there is a particular attraction to a crime novel set in a different country.

**O** Do you think great thrillers can also qualify as great literature?

**PDJ** Perhaps they can seldom be "great" literature but they deserve to be called literature sometimes. And sometimes good literature.

**Jo Mercer** You published your first Dalglish in 1962. How has murder changed in half a century?

**PDJ** I doubt whether murder has changed – although the detective novel certainly has. But the common motives of greed, jealousy, anger and hatred have stayed the same.

**Mark Johnson** Have you ever switched your killer halfway through a novel?

**PDJ** No – I plot and plan with great care.

**Mary Wilkinson** What is your hit rate for spotting the killer in the works of other writers? Do you think you might be better than the ordinary reader at literary detection?

**PDJ** As I have been reading crime novels – mostly detective stories – for 80 years, I can spot most of the tricks – particularly those of Agatha Christie. I am also quite likely to hit upon the killer in more modern novels. But spotting the murderer is probably less important in modern detective stories. The pure puzzle – as with Agatha Christie – although ingenious, is probably less important today than the examination of motive, the interest of setting and distinction of writing. The detective novel has moved closer to mainline fiction.

**Kate Kellaway** Is it really true, as I have read somewhere, that your first editor at Faber said he would try and get WH Auden to write a few poems for Dalglish for you to slip into your novels?

**PDJ** Yes, though whether Auden would have done it is another matter. It was Charles Monteith who said: "We'll get Wystan to write some poetry for Dalglish."

**Heather87** I am a budding crime writer. What would your main tips for me be?

**PDJ** Increase your word power. Increase your vocabulary. Words are our raw materials. Practise writing. Read widely, particularly of the best writing. Learn to try and understand and sympathise with other people. Go through life always open to experience. Nothing that happens to a writer, good or ill, is ever lost.

**Hertfordbridge** Was Dorothy L Sayers an influence on you?

**PDJ** Yes, I would say that she was. She showed me that crime fiction and good writing are compatible. Although she is, of course, very much of her time and there was a sort of snobbishness that went with those days.

**Gwyneth Boswell** Do you feel that the BBC has become any less like the unwieldy ship you described when you interviewed its DG, Mark Thompson?

**PDJ** I should say that both the chairman of the Trust and the

director general are determined on reform but that, largely due to the financial crisis, the waters ahead are bound to be stormy. I should probably also say I am a strong supporter of the BBC.

**Quelquechose** Are you the "buxom grandmother" who writes detective fiction in *A Taste for Death*?

**PDJ** Now that I am a great grandmother, I am less buxom – or buxom in the wrong places [laughs]. This seems inseparable from old age. Everything falls down. I am like the Queen – the same shape all the way down. You know what I mean. Your bosom goes and your bottom goes.

**Q** For all the influence of Jane Austen on your work, there is a clear stylistic divergence between you when it comes to descriptive density. Did that bother you while writing *Death Comes to Pemberley*?

**PDJ** We don't get detailed descriptions of the countryside or houses in Jane Austen as we do in my work but because I was trying to write in her style in *Death Comes to Pemberley*, I had to exercise some discipline.

**Grazina McCarthy** Why is it that most of your stories start in autumn? Do you think the season lends the right atmosphere for murder?

**PDJ** Yes, I agree. Autumn lends itself to the detective story through the dying light, which is

useful in plot making. People can be concealed by darkness and there is a certain melancholy in the dying of the year.

**Pirkko Mahlamäki** What are your views on the right to die with dignity?

**PDJ** I think a person whose life, perhaps through appalling pain, has become intolerable has the right to end it. But I am less assured of the right of other people to indulge in mercy killing. I think murder has to remain the unique crime. And many old people would feel that they ought to end their life perhaps to benefit their children, if the practice were to become commonplace and other elderly people were doing it.

**Jeanette Winterson** What do you love best?

**PDJ** Some people – including members of my family. The security of my home. The English spring. Walking by the sea in Suffolk. [she has a house in Southwold]. And the solace of reading.

**Peter Lant** What is the best thing about being a nonagenarian?

**PDJ** [There is a prolonged silence during which she admits that her silence might serve as an answer in itself.] Oh dear, what can one say for it? One has learnt what is important and what is unimportant. At least, I hope I have learned the difference. I agree with Keats that the most important thing in life is the "holiness of the heart's affections".

**Kate Kellaway** Do you feel lucky in the life you have had?

**PDJ** I feel incredibly fortunate and blessed, for which I nightly give thanks. I have worked hard and tried to do my best but many other people do that without the good fortune that I have enjoyed.

[<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/15/pd-james-author-interview-readers>]



## Pride and Prejudice and Murder

Aspiring writers take heart: one of the most beloved novels of all time was rejected when it was fluttered in front of publishers in 1797 — or so the historical record suggests. Called *First Impressions*, it was written by a country girl whose father was so impressed by his daughter's sage and vivacious creation that he sent a letter of inquiry to a publisher, who refused even to look at the manuscript. Never mind. Sixteen years later, the book appeared under a different title. Perhaps you've heard of it: *Pride and Prejudice*.

Here's a quick recap. A proud, clever girl named Elizabeth Bennet — who has four sisters; a silly, social-climbing mother; a smart but passive father; and no family fortune to speak of — is pursued, reluctantly, by a dashing, arrogant wealthy man named Fitzwilliam Darcy, who loves her but considers her beneath him. "Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections?" he rudely asks, grudgingly confessing his love and demanding her hand in marriage. He's stunned when she refuses him. Eventually, Lizzy teaches him more "gentlemanlike" manners and they marry in a double wedding with Darcy's friend Bingley and Lizzy's sister Jane, whom Darcy had initially striven to keep asunder. How did the marriages work out? Almost 200 years later, we have an answer in the form of a satisfying sequel called *Death Comes to Pemberley*, a mystery by the ingenious P. D. James.

This has been an excellent year for Austen buffs, marking the 200th anniversary of her first appearance in print, with the anonymously published novel *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen had begun writing that book years earlier, and its success meant that publication of three other works followed quickly. But so, unfortunately, did her death, in 1817, at the age of 41. Nonetheless, her fame has lived on, magnified in recent decades by films and Web sites inspired by her novels. Indeed, the current Austen vogue has led to a near epidemic of imitation, so much so that HarperCollins recently announced it would enlist six popular authors to invent contemporary versions of her oeuvre. First up is Joanna Trollope, with *Sense and Sensibility*.

That's quite an audacious undertaking. So far, the most successful modern reincarnation of Austen was Amy Heckerling's 1995 movie "Clueless," a glossy overhaul of *Emma* that clad the ageless bones of Austen's plot in glossy Hollywood flesh and fashion. Meanwhile, the most grotesque reanimation has surely been the 2009 para-literary niche phenomenon *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*.

But this bicentennial year has produced a veritable zombie army of wannabe -Janeites. The last six months have seen the emergence of such *Pride and Prejudice* tributes as *Fitzwilliam Darcy, Rock Star* (in which Darcy and Bingley play in a

rock band called Slurry and team up for a summer tour with Long Borne Suffering, a girl group headed by Lizzy and Jane); *Definitely Not Mr. Darcy* (a divorced single mother auditions for an Austen-inspired TV show); *A Weekend With Mr. Darcy* (an Austen-obsessed professor travels to a conference in the English countryside and meets a man); *Pride and Prejudice: Hidden Lusts* (did Darcy need help in the "manhood" department?); and the smart-enough but skippable "original" story collection *Jane Austen Made Me Do It*. Reading the productions of this motley crew of Regency-sparked Frankensteins, one remembers the reflection of Lizzy Bennet's sardonic father: "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?"

For that reason, it's surprisingly gratifying, while turning the pages of P. D. James's homage, to find oneself laughing not at the characters but with them. Baroness James, 91, a retired British civil servant, former magistrate, BBC governor and author of 20 previous books (many featuring the poet detective Adam Dalgliesh) is far too wise to overstep her authorial license. Her innovation has been to transplant the *dramatis personae* from Austen into her own suspenseful universe, preserving their likenesses and life force. James clearly understands that many readers feel as close an attachment to Austen's characters



as they do to their own relatives and friends. So she cannily begins by furnishing answers to the natural question: "Where are they now?"

How right it feels to learn, as James informs us, that Bingley and Jane moved away from Netherfield soon after their marriage, wanting to put distance between them and the ever-querulous Mrs. Bennet at Longbourn. What a delight to read that tone-deaf, humorless Mary Bennet has married a "thin, melancholy" rector, "given to preaching sermons of inordinate length and complicated theology." How apt that the evil seducer George Wickham, after marrying Lizzy's frivolous sister Lydia, worked as a secretary for the foppish baronet Sir Walter Elliot (a character from Austen's novel *Persuasion*) until Lydia's "open flirtation" with the baronet and Wickham's simpering attempts to ingratiate himself with his employer's daughter met "finally with disgust." And what a treat to see Bingley's snobbish sisters, Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley, get their comeuppance — and Harriet Smith (of *Emma*) her reward.

Above all, James will delight Austen's devoted fans by showing Darcy and Lizzy to be (if anything) more in love and better matched than anyone might have hoped, six years into their marriage. But can their union withstand the stress of a murder on the grounds of Pemberley, occasioned by the unwelcome appearance of Lizzy's

sister Lydia, who gate-crashes the estate in a careering coach on the eve of the Darcys' annual autumn ball, having left a body or two behind in the Pemberley woodland? "A murder in the family can provide a frisson of excitement at fashionable dinner parties," James's omniscient narrator hopefully remarks, then quickly changes course, concluding, in a perfect Austenlike summation, "But little social credit can be expected from the brutal dispatch of an undistinguished captain of the infantry, without money or breeding to render him interesting."

Lizzy's father, who comes to offer moral support to his daughter and son-in-law, assesses the contretemps with characteristic levity: "Lydia's husband seems to have distinguished himself by this latest exploit in managing to combine entertainment for the masses with the maximum embarrassment for his family." But can these dark doings in Derbyshire be resolved without blotting Pemberley's escutcheon and blighting the Darcys' marital felicity? Soon enough, coroners, magistrates, witnesses, peers and plebeians will all make their way to London . . . and tell it to the judge.

The greatest pleasure of this novel is its unforced, effortless, effective voice. James hasn't written in florid cod--Regency whorls, the overblown language

other mimics so often employ. Not infrequently, while reading *Death Comes to Pemberley*, one succumbs to the impression that it is Austen herself at the keyboard. When Lizzy observes her girlhood friend Charlotte Lucas deftly wrangling her pompous, tedious husband, Mr. Collins (whose hand Lizzy had spurned), her admiration for Charlotte's artfulness could scarcely be improved upon by the woman who dreamed these characters up: "She consistently congratulated him on qualities he did not possess in the hope that, flattered by her praise and approval, he would acquire them."

Note to HarperCollins: If you're still hunting an ideal contemporary ghost writer for Austen's mock-Gothic mystery, *Northanger Abbey*, look no further.

[<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/books/review/death-comes-to-pemberley-by-p-d-james-book-review.html>]

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