

The Mysterious Affair at Pemberley

Death Comes to Pemberley

By P.D. James.

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Review by Laurie Kaplan.

Trouble is brewing deep in Pemberley Woods: a quarrel, shots in the night, Lydia (yes, Lydia) screaming bloody murder. Instead of dancing at Lady Anne's Ball, the most important social event of the season, Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam (now elevated to the title Viscount Hartlep), and the Honorable Henry Alveston find themselves trekking through the undergrowth to recover they know-not-what in the glade:

Passing slowly, almost in awe, between two of the slender trunks, they stood as if physically rooted, speechless with horror. Before them, its stark colours a brutal contrast to the muted light, was a tableau of death. No one spoke. They moved slowly forward as one, all three holding their lanterns high; their strong beams, outshining the gentle radiance of the moon, intensified the bright red of an officer's tunic and the ghastly blood-smearred face and glaring eyes turned toward them.

Death has come to Pemberley. (Reader, I shall not reveal who did what to whom and whether he should hang.)

P.D. James has created a diverting hybrid novel, part tribute to *Pride and Prejudice*, part mystery, and part social history. Organized into six books, plus prologue and epilogue, *Death Comes to Pemberley* is an imaginative extension of

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Austen's novel. With Pemberley House and estate at the center of the murder investigation, the plot of this mystery takes unexpected turns into rooms in the House, odd outbuildings on the estate, and convoluted paths through the woods. Ghosts, suicide, secret letters to be burnt in the night, a hanging, an ornate tombstone for a dead dog—James assembles enough red herrings to convince readers that the shades of Pemberley have indeed been polluted.

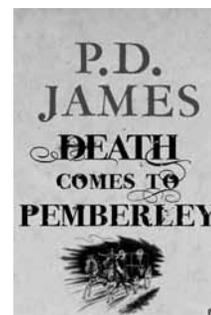
The numerous cast calls out resoundingly for at least four episodes of a TV adaptation. A rather Dickensian crowd of accessory characters—Dr. Jonah Makepeace, the Reverend Samuel Cornbinder, the Bidwells, et al.—mix easily with characters from *Pride and Prejudice*. On the night the murder occurs, while the Bingleys are visiting Pemberley, Wickham (clever, handsome, and not rich) turns up unexpectedly and under strange circumstances. Captain Denny, Mrs. Younge, the Gardiners, and Mr. Bennet all make their appearances. Capable Mrs. Reynolds is a constant problem-solving presence, an assurance that, even though the mortuary van is at the front door, life at Pemberley will carry on without a hitch. In intricate intertextual twists, Mr. and Mrs. Knightley from *Highbury* appear, as do Mr. and Mrs. Martin. Sir Walter Elliot and his still unmarried daughter Elizabeth form part of the Wickhams' shady history of employment found and lost.

Readers of mystery novels will love the gory details that P.D. James herself so delights in revealing. In Book Three: "Police at Pemberley," James explores the tensions between the law and the medical establishment. Even as guards keep watch over the prime suspect and the dead body lies stretched out in Darcy's gunroom, a contretemps arises between the magistrate and the physicians regarding their contrasting responsibilities to the living and the dead. In a quip that pre-dates the invention of blood-typing, Sir Selwyn Hardcastle taunts Dr. Obadiah Belcher: "your clever scientific

colleagues have not yet found a way of distinguishing one man's blood from another's?" When the physicians begin their examination of the dead body, Dr. Belcher delivers a description as graphic as a report from *The Killing* or Inspector Morse. He points out the "severe head wounds with strands of hair, tissue and blood vessels impacted into the bone," "the haemorrhaging of the blood vessels beneath the bone," and "internal bleeding between the skull and the membrane covering the brain." It is judged that a woman did not commit this crime.

Baroness James makes Pemberley a dark and stormy place, but the details about the characters, the murder, the suspects, and the trial mesh with the texture of *Pride and Prejudice*. We could wish that Elizabeth would have been feistier when Pemberley is invaded in the night by magistrates, hysterics, and villains, and perhaps Darcy is a bit too loquacious in the Epilogue as he takes us back to the "disgraceful letter" he gave to Elizabeth at Rosings, but these are minor quibbles, considering how James allows Georgiana to grow in stature as she is wooed by Henry Alveston.

With its web of secrets, silences, lies, and alibis, *Death Comes to Pemberley* explores the darker repercussions of the Darcy-Bennet connection. For Janeites, part of the sleuthing will be connecting *Death Comes to Pemberley* with Jane Austen's novels—with her sense of character, wit, style, and moral compass. It is a foregone conclusion, your Honor, that "The peace and security of England depends on gentlemen living in their houses as good landlords and masters, considerate to their servants, charitable to the poor, and ready, as justices of the peace, to take a full part in promoting peace and order in their communities."



United Kingdom