



Black As He's Painted

Ngaio Marsh

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Portrait of a murder...

Superintendent Roderick Alleyn's old school chum-- whom his wife Troy longs to paint-- is now President of Ng'ombwana, a brand-new African republic. This handsome, charismatic dictator has enemies of every stripe: from ruddy-faced ex-colonists to new rivals, from dispossessed businessmen to racist crackpots. But when a ceremonial spear deals death at his lavish embassy party in London, Alleyn must decipher the victim's last utterance and expose an assassin's true colors...

Black As He's Painted Details

Date : Published 2000 by HarperCollins (first published 1973)

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Author : Ngaio Marsh

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From Reader Review Black As He's Painted for online ebook

PI Farmer says

This was my first book in the series so it was a bit difficult to catch up on who the characters all were but it was a marvelous, tautly written book. I will be looking for other books in the series. I especially enjoyed the byplay between Alleyn and Fox.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in August 1999.

'The best Ngaio Marsh for a long time' is how the Daily Telegraph greeted the appearance of Black As He's Painted (according to the front cover). By 1975, she have produced quite a long string of disappointing novels, and it wouldn't have taken a great deal to deserve this tag; but in fact Black As He's Painted is one of the best of all Marsh's novels.

The story concerns a visit made by the President of the Commonwealth nation of Ng'omwana, known as "Boomer" to his friends, to London. He insists on dealing with the London police through Alleyn, an old public school friend of his, rather than allowing Special Branch to work directly with him on his security. Special Branch is not happy at his unwillingness to co-operate with their wishes, particularly as the Boomer had survived an assassination attempt only a few months previously. And then the Ng'omwanan ambassador in London is killed at a reception early in the visit, apparently in mistake for the president.

Black as He's Painted is not only a slightly unusual mystery - assassination is usually the province of the thriller, with little difficulty pinning down the identity of the killer. It contains two of Marsh's most appealing characters. The Boomer is a rather larger than life caricature of the post-colonial African politician, but he is great fun. A tendency to patronise the Africans is a flaw in the book, but its attitude towards them is at least of the seventies rather than the thirties.

The second character is the cat Lucy Lockett, whose portrayal will certainly make this book the favourite among those of Marsh's readers who love cats. Rescued from neglect and maltreatment, she not only takes over the life of her new owner but also discovers important clues in the investigation (as cats need no search warrants).

Anne says

The plot to assassinate the president of Ng'ombwana on his visit to London doesn't go as planned--or does it?

I'm enjoying Ngaio Marsh's books, but I was pretty much able to guess where this one was going pretty early on. Still, the story itself was enjoyable so I listened through till the end.

Rowan MacBean says

I've been giving a lot of these books three stars when I mean 3.5, and I just needed to distinguish this one as difficult for me to deal with by giving it a lower rating. There was a good deal of Troy, which I always like, and some very good Fox moments, and Alleyn interacting with a cat...but the double-whammy of a TON of racism and almost as much fatphobia just made it much more emotional labor than the rest of the series.

Damaskcat says

Roderick Alleyn was at school with the current president of Ng'ombwana – nicknamed The Boomer. The President is on a visit to England and staying in his country's embassy and the powers that be consider his life is at risk. Alleyn and a colleague from Special Branch are tasked with trying to make him abide by security restrictions – which seems like a losing battle at times.

Close to the Embassy there are several suspicious characters including a brother and sister called Sanskrit who make and sell pottery pigs, and a former army officer from the Ng'ombwanan army and his wife who seem to be perpetually drunk.

When the ambassador is murdered in full view of a hundred invited guests both Alleyn and his SB colleague Fred Gibson feel they have failed. There are plenty of people with motives and plenty of people who have information which could help the police investigation – including Lucy Lockett the cat – who has kleptomaniac tendencies. I really enjoyed this well plotted and amusing story. There are some very unpleasant characters but there are also some very lovable ones including the larger than life President.

There are few authors who can approach Ngaio Marsh's skill at plotting puzzle style crime stories. This is an excellent example of how to make the pieces fit and leave the reader with a sense of satisfaction even if they didn't work out who the murderer was. If you enjoy Agatha Christie, Georgette Heyer, Patricia Wentworth and Gladys Mitchell then you will enjoy Ngaio Marsh.

FangirlNation says

Ngaio Marsh came back strong with her 28th book, 1974's *Black as He's Painted*. The president of Ng'ombwana, a newly emerging African nation (in other words, a former colony of England, finally allowed to have its own government), is scheduled to make a state visit to England, and Special Branch is highly concerned. In a recent visit to Mozambique, the president barely escaped a shot at him, and they are afraid someone will try to kill him in England, breaking its record as an assassination-free zone. So Special Branch sends Detective Superintendent Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard to Ng'ombwana to meet with his old school friend, known to his friends as "The Boomer."

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Leslie says

3.5★

Wanda McCaddon does a great narration & her voice for Inspector Alleyn's school friend Boomer was particularly excellent.

As for the book itself, I was surprised to find that this is a Marsh that I had not previously read. I have seen in some of the other reviews that some people had problems with this book's treatment of race. Certainly some of the characters were racist but just as clearly others were not. If you are sensitive about this issue, then it might be better to skip this one.

I thought that the mystery was well done but one big section of the solution was clear to me soon after the initial murder so I reduced my rating by ½ star.

Krista says

My least favorite Marsh book so far. Very dated and rather offensive to modern sensibilities. That said, please don't rewrite it and remove all allusions to the negro race as Marsh describes them; that would be silly. The exploration of prejudice itself is very instructive, even if the mystery wanders over into sensationalism in a very un-Marsh-like way.

As a secondary note, I read the Jove paperback, published in the 70s. Very, very obvious what was selling then; the back cover blurb talks about a murder that might start World War Three when there's not even a hint of something of that within the text of the book. Marsh's name is written in a font that my son said looked "bloody and full of terror." Marketed as a slasher novel. Yet still a cozy; a cozy set outside the typical confines of most books of this nature but still featuring the type of persnickety-yet-likeable main character more often found in St. Mary Meade.

P.D.R. Lindsay says

I always enjoy rereading this novel as Mr Whipplestone and Lucy are such delightful characters. The plot is a good tight one and I enjoy the usual display of Ms Marsh's writing skills.

The comments by some readers about racism are puzzling. The comments and attitudes of some of the less pleasant characters are still heard today. Just as loudly and nastily.

For Troy and Rory fans the glimpses of their relationship in the novel is another pleasure. Troy the artist is always fun to 'watch'. And Rory and Fox at work make enjoyable reading.

The embassy makes a marvellous setting and Boomer is indeed as black as he's painted. A clever title indeed.

Gerry says

I can understand why the Daily Telegraph described this book as the best Ngaio Marsh for a long time because it probably is just that.

A quirky storyline with the President of an African country involved in the murder of one of his household ... but was he, himself, the intended victim? And who would want to kill him as he was only visiting the UK and had no known enemies.

Syuperintendent Roderick Alleyn gets the call, mainly because he was a school chum of the President, who was educated in England. Along with assistance from Special Branch the characters of a close-knit community, The Capricorns, all seem to have some connection with the President or his country.

But which of them did the dastardly deed? With the invaluable assistance of a black cat named Lucy Lockett, the mystery is cleverly unravelled and the perpetrator is unmasked. An intelligent and cleverly constructed thriller, which is well worth a read.

Betty says

I read Dame Marsh in the 196-70's and really enjoyed them. I am reading them again from my library. This, one is a hardcover version. The Special Branch is in a panic as the President of an emerging African nation of Ng'ombwana is planning State Visit to England. He is noted for doing his own thing as he is an old school friend of Roderick Alleyn; he is asked to help them protect him. If you like twists and turns in a book read an expert does it. This changes will keep you guessing and the ending is a surprise. I have forgotten how much I enjoyed this series.

Sergei Ter-Tumasov says

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Miriam says

Sam the retired Foreign Service officer and his determinedly rescued cat were charming, but insufficient to make up for the author's and characters' racism. Marsh is considerably less simpatica towards Africans than she is to the Maori who more often appear in her novels. And don't bother jumping in with, "That's just how people were Back Then" because this book wasn't written that long ago. It reminded me a bit of another recent read, Speaker of Mandarin; both are later novels by elderly women who attitudes seem dated to a period a decade or three earlier than the pub date.

The mystery itself seemed oddly awkward, with diplomatic strictures taking center stage over clues and characters. And seriously why would (view spoiler).

Elena says

Another good Inspector Alleyn mystery; this one involved an African school friend of the detective who went on to become a president/dictator of his emergent nation. I think parts of it would be considered racist by today's overly sensitive standards but Marsh clearly was trying to combat some racist attitudes of her time. Her villains were a sort of Klan group that had it in for people of this imagined African nation and one of the lesser heroes loves the nation, culture, and language. And then Alleyn tries to keep his friend from being assassinated during his visit to England while attempting to bridge the divide of culture and time passed since school days.

aPriL does feral sometimes says

If it wasn't for Mr. Whipplestone and Lucy Lockett, I'd give this one in the series two stars. Given our current environment of real terrorism plots, it is an interesting book and to some degree gave me a think on what if a neighbor lived next door that showed some signs of a being part of a conspiracy to do violence.

It's a mildly patronizing plot, and some obviously dislike that tone towards the African characters; but actually, in my opinion, Marsh is consistently patronizing and ironic in every one of her books towards every one of her characters. I don't think she writes any differently in tone or attitude whether the characters are white or not. The books though, are representative of liberal-ish attitudes of their eras, be they the 1930's, or the 1970's. Obviously, Marsh was making an effort to cross racial and class boundaries in a humanistic fashion, trying to recognize the differences of culture while recognizing everyone's humanity. However, she could only work with what she knew, as do we all. The only personal dissonance I ever feel from her books is the lack of writing in the year 2000-ish politically correct, publically approved speech, but I'm not insulted, shocked or upset over that. I find it relaxing as I despise political correctness in books. A rewrite would outrage me, as the recent changes to Huckleberry Finn did. A lot of plot points cannot be understood if all the reasons for antagonism and strife are removed!

For the record, I went through a liberal radical period, then i needed a job and seethed occasionally and

politely over any ugly prejudices. Now I'm close to 60, and I can afford being more outspoken. Despite occasional irrational moments, I think it is better to forgive minor transgressions of all kinds when people cross over social boundaries in friendship, but mess it up. I mess up all the time.
