



Uncle Abner Master of Mysteries: A Collection of Classic Detective Stories

Melville Davisson Post

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This work usually appears on lists of the ten most important books of detective stories published in the United States. The tales of Uncle Abner take place in what is now West Virginia, in the 1840's or 1850's. Melville Davisson Post (1869-1930) was a lawyer, political insider, and candidate for President of the United States (Democrat, 1924). He was one of the really great writers of the detective short story and is ranked in the same class as Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Uncle Abner Master of Mysteries: A Collection of Classic Detective Stories Details

Date : Published June 1st 2004 by Fredonia Books (NL) (first published 1918)

ISBN : 9781410106315

Author : Melville Davisson Post

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Mystery, Short Stories, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Thriller, Mystery Thriller



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From Reader Review Uncle Abner Master of Mysteries: A Collection of Classic Detective Stories for online ebook

Hunter Baker says

Over the top awesome. Another great Christian detective. Maybe even better than Father Brown. Imagine a massive Calvinist who solves crimes in 19th century Virginia. Great stuff. Deserves a wide audience.

Laurel Hicks says

Transport Father Brown to the hills of Virginia, give him physical strength to match his wits and character, set him on a horse, and you have Uncle Abner. These fine mystery tales were first published in 1918.

Yibbie says

Set in early America. The main character is very near puritanical in his views on life, and that makes for an interesting detective. I liked it.

Review for second reading...

Staunch Christian. Unapologetically American. Those are the best aspects of this book.

About the first aspect, staunch Christianity or maybe I should just call it faithful Christianity is a rare quality in modern fiction. Post created a Christian character who is dedicated to his God and the Word of God.

When was the last time you read a book that dared use Scripture and all the attendant social implications?

Instead, of seeing a psychological problem Post has his hero see a sin as outlined by an example in God's Word. It's very refreshing.

Then the second one, patriotism is no longer fashionable. It seems that it's okay to love America, but you have to be at least embarrassed by the strong Christian men that founded it. Post wrote with not just a love but an overwhelming respect for their faith, strength, and government. It's not a blind reverence though. He explains how each aspect influenced the other. He explains how they tried to put the power into the hands of the majority. The practical applications of that idea are really very interesting when applied to a mystery story. It's very refreshing to read a book that stands so firmly for the rule of law, especially a law based on God's authority.

Then the mysteries are really good. They twist around and double back so you never know what's going to happen. Abner is a fine upright man who understands the frailties of humanity and extends mercy along with justice. The villains are quite a mix as well. They could be thoroughly vile desperadoes or desperate needy people or any situation in between. Even the clues are unique. They could be scientific, legal, natural, or even customary.

The only drawback is that there are a few curse words. The Christian characters never use them, but I wish they weren't there.

Betty says

Originally published in 1918, these stories are set in the mid 1800s in Virginia. They are as interesting for their historical setting as for the clever deductions made by Uncle Abner in the pursuit of justice. As the story progresses, the reader is led to the suspect without understanding how Uncle Abner has arrived at his conclusion. Often the solution cannot be deduced by the reader because of the withholding of a vital fact, which would not be considered "fair" nowadays. Highly recommended for mystery buffs.

Leslie says

Maybe 2½ stars. These short mystery stories are not mysteries in the contemporary sense - they aren't whodunits which the reader has a chance to figure out the culprit. Rather, they are crime stories which show the darker corners of human nature. Post's main character, Uncle Abner, was interesting but not enough for me to want to read more. The style was sort of a cross between Washington Irving and Arthur Conan Doyle, which I found trying at times. The setting was a bit muddled - in some of the stories, it is clearly before 1860 (there are still slaves & the region described is part of Virginia instead of West Virginia) while in others there are indications that it is supposed to be the 1890s ("200 years since the massacre of Glen Coe").

Katherine Rowland says

Of all the detective stories I remember originally reading in some long-forgotten Ellery Queen omnibus, Uncle Abner has stayed with me the most clearly. In Uncle Abner's world--the Virginia hills in the 1840s or so--there is black and there is white. The stories have a strong religious element, with good pitted against evil. There are quite a few forays into justice versus law, as well: what is right? And when is lawful *not* right?

The stories are not all fair play, which may bother some readers. The historical viewpoint, however, has a charm of its own, and I confess to a great liking for the straightforwardness of the stories: good versus bad, and good (in the form of Uncle Abner) wins.

Henry Patterson says

The stories are uneven and there is never a doubt whodunit, but even the lesser stories are excellent. The best are among the finest mystery stories ever written. "Naboth's Vineyard" is one of my all-time favorite stories. The stories are set in what is today West Virginia before the Civil War and some stories are marred with stereotypical portrayals of African-American slaves. Not that this in any way justifies the author's choices in his portrayals of African-Americans, but the stories were written a century ago by a man who was born in and lived his whole life in West Virginia.

Pavel Beneš says

A protože jsou to dob?e napsaný p?íb?hy, skv?le se ilustrovaly a upravovaly (Kalich).

Ron says

“Sometimes, a man’s voice can be all that separates darkness from light.”

Despite breaking every current political correctness standard, these stories (first published in 1914) are well-written. Women’s roles, slavery, sympathetic Christians. Abner is the sleuth, solving apparently insolvable crimes and defending innocence.

“Oftimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truth.”

Each story is a short, stand-alone murder mystery. Abner solves them with liberal applications of deductive reasoning but from a heavily scriptural viewpoint. Not sure about Post’s denominational affiliation, but Abner comes on strong for truth, justice and the American way. Along the way he quotes and applies the Bible truthfully.

“No one of them believed in what the other taught, but they all believed in justice.”

Not "the finest mysteries ever written", but they're good.

The heart of a woman is the deepest of God’s riddles.”

Alexis Neal says

This book answers the question "What if Sherlock Holmes were a cowboy?"

The narrator, now grown, recalls tagging along with his Uncle Abner as he solved various 'mysteries' that utterly befuddled the inhabitants of a rural community in western Virginia (eventually West Virginia) at the turn of the nineteenth century. With the state government all but inaccessible across the Alleghenies, it falls to the rather unimaginative justice of the peace to be the arbiter of justice in this farming community. Fortunately, he has the assistance of the perceptive and devoutly Protestant Abner, who is astute (and creative) enough to think outside the box and thus unravels more than a few tangled situations to reach a just (though not always strictly legal) outcome.

So . . . Sherlock Holmes as played by John Wayne.

Of course, Abner is more landed gentry/cattle baron than cowboy, but the idea's the same. The stories combine the moral code of the Old West and Holmes' logical reasoning and observational skills (though Abner lacks Holmes' extensive scientific training), with a healthy dose of religious conviction thrown in. The collection includes all 22 Uncle Abner stories, none of which is longer than 20 pages, so it's easy to read the book in small chunks.

The mysteries themselves aren't all that great, though the resolution of "An Act of God" was particularly

clever, and I have to respect "The Doomdorf Mystery" on account of it's one of the earliest locked-room mysteries. Still, Abner's a one-of-a-kind character, and Post's descriptions of him are fantastic. I think he compares him to Oliver Cromwell no fewer than 3 times in 22 stories, and the stories are replete with (surprisingly relevant) Biblical references. Post interjects lots of historical, political, religious, and legal observations along the way, and it is these passages--rather than the actual mysteries--that make the stories worth reading.

Honestly, I can't do better than to point you to this excellent article on Post, Abner, and why we should hear a lot more about them than we do. If you enjoy old-school mysteries (Agatha Christie, G.K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, Georgette Heyer, etc.), you should definitely give these a try.

Tonja says

Interesting

I enjoyed this book. Great short mystery stories! I was fascinated how Abner solved these mysteries! If you are looking for a collection of short mysteries to read, I highly recommend reading this book!

Michael says

18 short stories. The stories were okay, but they were written in the early 20th century and were set in the mid 19th, so the language made it difficult to follow. I was reading a Kindle edition, so there were what I believe were typos, but who knows. I just found it hard to follow the dialogue as the characters were not speaking as we speak today.

Elisabeth says

A collection of eighteen excellent mystery short stories in a unique setting—rural Virginia in the early 1800s. Comparison to G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories, which I've been reading and enjoying, are apt, though the two detectives in many respects are polar opposites—one a small, mild, English Catholic; the other a big, stalwart American Protestant. There is a strong religious element to the Uncle Abner stories. Abner's faith is at the root of his belief in justice that drives him to find the correct solutions to a variety of crimes. Justice is the theme of the collection as a whole. Some of the stories demonstrate the limits of human law, while still reinforcing its importance, but above all stress the existence of a higher justice, and the conviction that all guilty parties will meet the justice of God even if they are beyond the reach of human law.

As a reader of Westerns, a number of elements in the description of life in Virginia at this period struck familiar chords—the grazing, driving, selling (and sometimes stealing) of cattle and journeys on horseback. A number of the stories involve disputes over land, another familiar feature in the Western. "A Twilight Adventure," a neatly constructed story concerning cattle thieving, demonstrates the dangers of both lynch law and circumstantial evidence. Last year I read Frank Lawrence Owsley's Plain Folk of the Old South, and the Uncle Abner stories reminded me of Owsley's description of the livestock-raising economy of the early South, which bore a strong resemblance to that which later developed in the West.

The stories are narrated by Abner's young nephew, who is present at the scene of some of them, and relates the others second-hand. There is also a foil for the detective in the person of Squire Randolph, the justice of the peace, an honest but talkative and pompous man who is continually baffled by Abner's line of reasoning until the moment when the truth is revealed. Abner's methods are similar to Father Brown's in that he sees the truth a lot sooner than the other characters or the reader, but drops cryptic remarks along the way that all make sense in the end. He also frequently deals with skeptics who deny the existence or power of God. There's a great historical flavor to the whole book, and the writing is also excellent, with some beautiful, atmospheric descriptive passages equal to those in Chesterton. Definitely a great read for anyone who loves classic, old-fashioned detective stories; a fine piece of entertainment with deeper, edifying elements as well.

Jeff Hobbs says

Read so far:

The Doomdorf Mystery--
The Wrong Hand--
The Angel of the Lord--
An Act of God--
The Treasure Hunter--
The House of the Dead Man--
A Twilight Adventure--
The Age of Miracles--
The Tenth Commandment--
The Devil's Tools--
The Hidden Law--
The Riddle--
The Straw Man--
The Mystery of Chance--
The Concealed Path--
The Edge of the Shadow--
The Adopted Daughter--
Naboth's Vineyard--

B.V. says

Melville Davisson Post (1869-1930) was born into a prosperous family in West Virginia and practiced criminal and corporate law for several years. However, after the success of his first novel series, he promptly dropped his law career to write full time. He was a prolific writer, penning numerous stories in national magazines like The Saturday Evening Post and The Ladies Home Journal.

He wrote a couple of series and some standalone novels, but it may have been his twenty-plus stories featuring the mystery-solving and justice dispensing West Virginian backwoodsman, Uncle Abner, which helped make Post popular. Ellery Queen called the stories "an out-of-this-world target for future detective-story writers," and the 1941 review of the mystery genre, *Murder for Pleasure*, declared that Uncle Abner was, after Edgar Allan Poe's Arsène Dupin, "the greatest American contribution" to the cast of fictional

detectives.

Uncle Abner is described as "a big, broad-shouldered, deep-chested Saxon, with all those marked characteristics of a race living out of doors and hardened by wind and sun. His powerful frame carried no ounce of surplus weight. It was the frame of an empire builder on the frontier of the empire. The face reminded one of Cromwell, the craggy features in repose seemed molded over iron but the fine gray eyes had a calm serenity, like remote spaces in the summer sky. The man's clothes were plain and somber. And he gave the impression of things big and vast."

Abner is also a Puritan at heart who always carries a Bible in his pocket and has a knack for finding out the truth. As his nephew, Martin, who frequently narrates the stories, says, "for all his iron ways, Abner was a man who saw justice in its large and human aspect, and he stood for the spirit, above the letter, of the truth." He is a stern authoritarian figure but equally so a kind and compassionate philosopher.

Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries was the first anthology (1918), and contained 18 Uncle Abner stories all told by Martin. The crimes primarily deal with murder or robbery and start after the crime has been committed and the killer thinks he's gotten away with it. "The Doomdorf Mystery," is the first story in the collection and also one of Post's best known. It features more than one possible suspect who all admit to being the killer, as well as a locked-room scenario ("the wall of the house is plumb with the sheer face of the rock. It is a hundred feet to the river ... but that is not all. Look at these window frames; they are cemented into their casement with dust").

The stories are most definitely of their pre Civil War setting, in that they feature the attitudes toward African-Americans prevalent at the time (with the associated language that today's readers might find offensive). If you can get past that, these are entertaining for the shrewd characterizations, tight plots and for the dispensing of frontier justice in an era that predated American police forces and procedures.
