



The Documents in the Case

Dorothy L. Sayers , Robert Eustace

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The grotesquely grinning corpse in the Devonshire shack was a man who died horribly -- with a dish of mushrooms at his side. His body contained enough death-dealing muscarine to kill 30 people. Why would an expert on fungi feast on a large quantity of this particularly poisonous species. A clue to the brilliant murderer, who had baffled the best minds in London, was hidden in a series of letters and documents that no one seemed to care about, except the dead man's son.

The Documents in the Case Details

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Elizabeth says

I didn't realize, before I started, that this is not a Peter Wimsey mystery. Actually, I really enjoyed it, after I'd figured out the difference. It's a collaboration between Sayers and one Robert Eustace—does anybody know anything about the nature of the collaboration? I found the intelligent, talented, but above all middle class (for want of a better term) characters quite refreshing and engaging, even the whacko ones. I also found the conceit of the novel's construction, as a collection of documents, kind of compelling—while it was impossible to read without bias, you did feel that you were a participant in a way that conventional first or third person narration doesn't allow.

I kept worrying that there would be a horrible twist turning my favorite character into the villain and was quite relieved when he got to the end with a clean conscience (apart from what he perceives to be treachery in narcing on his obnoxious friend). Wish I'd seen more of Elizabeth, too, as I quite liked her.

On a not-entirely-relevant note, I loved the conversation between the scientists and the creationists near the end, where the tangential Hoskyns manages an elegant balance of both:

"...all you people talk so cheerfully about Matter, as if you know what it was. I don't, and it's more or less my job to know. Go back again, go past your colloids and your sea-water. Go back to the dust of the earth and the mass of rotating cinders which was before the ocean even began. Go back to the sun... Go back to the nebula. Go back to the atom. Do some of the famous splitting we hear so much about. Where is your Matter? It isn't. It is a series of pushes or pulls or vortices in nothingness... Even your heredity-business is fortuitous. Why one set of chromosomes more than any other? Your chain of causation would only be a real one if all possible combinations and permutations were worked out in practice. Something is going on, that is as certain as anything can be—that is, I mean, it is the fundamental assumption we are bound to make in order to reason at all—but how it started or why it started is just as mysterious as it was when the first thoughtful savage invented a god to explain it." (pp 207-208)

I never know how seriously to take her science (is all that "optically active/inactive" stuff true?), and this was originally published in 1930, but I believe Hoskyns.

OK... I just looked this up on Wikipedia here and my questions are answered very briefly; "Robert Eustace" is Eustace Barton, who suggested Sayers use the polariscope to differentiate between organic and inorganic matter. The article says that "As a practising Christian, she was pleased with the religious-scientific theme offered to her by "Robert Eustace", which was based on the idea that the asymmetry of living molecules was an indication of the hand of God in creation.

"[The idea] touches the very key note of the mystery of the appearance of Life on this planet. There seems no escape from the conclusion that at some wonderful moment in the evolutionary process a Directive Force-From-Without entered upon the scene of Life itself."

— Dorothy L Sayers, Dorothy L Sayers: Her Life and Soul. Barbara Reynolds, Hodder & Stoughton 1993 , chapter 15

But also, the author of the article that Sayers wanted to make a much bigger impact with these very themes that struck a chord with me in the novel, and felt that she had failed to do so.

Michelle says

[
Pitiful: Poor **Miss Milsom**; the

Somyaiyer says

The plot of this book is so smart that it actually figured as a problem in one of my organic chemistry textbooks in college! One of those musty dusty tomes but still!!!

The brilliance of the science aside, it is truly an excellent book! Dorothy Sayers is a master at creating three dimensional characters that live and breathe. The book is written in an epistolary format and most incidents come across from two or more points of view, each so consistent and complete by itself that that alone would be reason enough to read this book. How does she get the characters, their voice, what they say and think and feel so right every time?

You can see what's coming from the start of course but that will in no way impair your enjoyment of the book, at least not unless you are looking for nothing more or less than a whodunit. Like all of Dorothy Sayers' novels, this is a book that does not see why it shouldn't be a 'real book' (in Lord Peter Wimsey's words) just because it is a mystery novel.
Great read.

Kim says

Yet another book confirming my very high opinion of Dorothy Sayers. This is her take on an epistolary novel, although it's not composed of letters only. As the title suggests, the novel consists of a range of documents which together form a prosecution brief. As is so often the case with Sayers, the mystery is only a part of what the book is about. While there is a mystery, the point of it is the "how" rather than the "who". The novel is also a dissertation on creation and the origin of life. I will freely admit that the science largely went over my head, but it actually didn't matter. I understood enough to be impressed. And then there was the wit, the passion and that fierce intelligence which characterises Sayers. In short, I loved it.

Theresa says

A very clever mystery!

"The Documents in the Case" is well-written and slowly played out to reveal the interplay of personalities. The author's sympathy at first is engaged by reading letters written by the major characters of the book. Slowly the personalities emerge and the reader is pleasurably encouraged to change their own perspectives of the characters as their individual idiosyncrasies, temptations and motives are revealed.

For instance, take a look at Miss Milsom:

"Miss Milson has always seemed to me a very tiresome woman, and lately she has been getting altogether above herself. She consults these psycho-analytical quacks, who encourage her to attach an absurd importance to her whims and feelings, and to talk openly at the dinner-table about things which, in my (doubtless old-fashioned) opinion, ought only to be mentioned to doctors. Besides, she is very lazy and untidy, and, instead of putting her mind to the housework, she litters the place with wool and bits of paper which she calls "art materials," and she borrows my paints and forgets to return them. There is no harm, of course, in her doing needlework and making calendars, if it does not interfere with her duties, but she has frequently been very impertinent when I have had occasion to speak about the unsatisfactory cooking.

Lathom has been painting a picture of her - a very clever thing, certainly, but it seems to have turned her head completely."

(How clever this portrayal of a character is done within the context of a letter!)

Suspense is slowly drawn out as the reader begins to question, along with Mr. Harrison's son, whether murder did in fact occur, and exactly how it could have been possible. Could Mr. Harrison, an expert with fungi, have mistakenly added poisonous mushrooms to his stew? With a clear motive (that is gradually unfurled) present, but no opportunity, did in fact, murder take place?

Suspense is slowly drawn out as the reader begins to question, along with Mr. Harrison's son, whether murder did in fact occur, and exactly how it could have been possible.

"I looked through the instrument. Dead blackness. But if the thing had shown all the colours of the rainbow, I should have been in no state to draw any conclusions from it. I sat stunned while somebody switched on the lights, extinguished the Bunsen burner and locked all the apparatus up again.

Then I found myself straggling after the other two, while they talked about something or the other. I had an idea that I came into it, and presently Waters turned back and thrust his arm into mine.

"What you want," he said, "is a double Scotch, and no soda."

I don't very well remember getting home, but that, I think, was not due to the double Scotch, but to the bewilderment of mind. I do remember waking my wife up and blurting out my story in a kind of confused misery, which must have perplexed and alarmed her. And I remember saying that it was quite useless to think of going to bed, because I should never sleep. And I remember waking this morning very late, with the feeling that someone was dead."

My interest waned somewhat in the middle, but I persevered and was so glad I did as the mystery began to be revealed in developed in the final third of the book.

Sayers, once again, has proven herself a master of the mystery genre. If you are new to Dorothy Sayers, I would recommend beginning with her "Strong Poison" to get a feel for her writing and creativity before tackling this one.

Leah says

Considering this was in the **1001 Books to Read Before You Die** list, I was not struck with its uniqueness. Telling a story entirely in documents and letters is not groundbreaking *now*, although in 1930 it may have been. Having just read a book of letters, these come across as far too verbose and writerly, and the statements filled with asides and inner thoughts just seem unlikely.

However, Sayers has the gift of subtlety and quiet humour that infuse her characters with definite qualities - likeable or unlikeable - and allow us to get really stuck into the story. The awful Miss Milsom, the unpleasant Mr Harrison and his equally prejudiced son, the cheeky and opinionated Mr Munting, all these characters are beautifully drawn and the kind of characters of whom definite opinions can be formed; this is a blessed relief in a world where character is being sacrificed for plot ever more frequently and ambivalence about characters has become the norm.

Mrs Harrison presents a problem - Sayers as a woman writer in the 20s and 30s must have come across rampant sexism on a daily basis, in newspapers and in publishing and in simple everyday conversation. It is problematic to me that she wrote this book from an all-male perspective, as I can't tell where the quietly comic digging at the male ego ends and the internalised women-as-subordinate attitude begins. The catalyst for the crime is never clearly pronounced - did the faithless wife plant the seed of malice in her lover's heart? Or was she too passive and reflective? Considering Sayers' unsympathetic portrayal of the husband, was she justifying the affair? Or condemning the faithlessness of women? Perhaps the perspective indicates her impression of the overall perspective of men - that women may be the cause of all woe in their lives, but aren't important enough to have clearly resolved motives or stories.

All in all, I would much rather read a Harriet Vane-centric story; now *there* was a female voice worth reading!

Nandakishore Varma says

Ellery Queen said: "Sayers has done more to add literary tone to crime fiction than most of her contemporaries." This is undoubtedly true. Sayers writes better English than most of her contemporaries, and her literary erudition simply shines through her stories. They are sometimes more slow-moving than conventional whodunits, but if you take the time to savour the prose and the way the narrative is constructed, it can be a rewarding experience.

There is usually no "rabbit-out-of-the-hat" ending in novels by Sayers, when the detective assembles all the possible suspects and picks out the least likely one as the murderer. Her stories are usually more mundane and down to earth: we come to know the likely suspects halfway through the story. The mystery is exactly how the murder was committed – the method, the opportunity, the unbreakable alibi. This novel is no different in that sense. However, it does have major differences in the fact that it does not contain Lord Peter Wimsey, and is written almost totally in epistolary format.

George Harrison, amateur cook who dabbles in the use of unusual material to prepare his dishes, is found dead in "The Shack", a remote country cottage in the village of Manaton in Devon. Apparently, it is an accident: he has eaten the poisonous *Amanita muscaria*, or "Fly Agaric", in place of the edible *Amanita rubescens* ("Warty Caps") – a common enough mistake as the fungi grow in the same area. He has been

alone in the cottage for three days when the accident happened, so any question of foul play is ruled out.

But his son, Paul Harrison, is not convinced. He knows his dad too well to know that he won't make a silly mistake like that. And when he comes to know that his young stepmother Margaret is having an intrigue with the painter Harwood Lathom who has been sharing their building, and this Lathom was staying with the unsuspecting Harrison at "The Shack" a couple of days before the death, his worst suspicions are aroused: he is sure it's murder. But the problem is, Lathom has a cast-iron alibi, as though he knew in advance it would be needed. How Paul unravels exactly how George was poisoned forms the heart of the story.

Sayers has structured the novel in two parts: "Synthesis", leading up to the crime, and "Analysis", showing how the mystery is unravelled. It is presented in the form of a dossier prepared by Paul Harrison to Sir Gilbert Pugh, Director of Public Prosecution, comprising various letters in chronological order and statements from Harrison himself and John Munting, Lathom's friend who is a bestselling author, to fill in the gaps. The letters are written by Agatha Milsom (Margaret Harrison's companion) to her sister; John Munting to his bride-to-be; George Harrison to his son and Margaret Harrison to Harwood Lathom. The beauty of this format is that every one is an unreliable narrator!

Agatha Milsom, whose letters opens the narrative, is by her own confession "undergoing a difficult phase" and seeing a psychiatrist – the lady obviously has a severe case of hysteria, and a dangerous repressed sexuality. She sees George Harrison as a boor who is terrorising his poor wife. In the letters Munting writes to his wife, however, Harrison is shown in more favourable light as a traditional middle-aged husband who is played upon by a drama-queen wife. George's letters to Paul (who is an engineer, away in Africa on an assignment), however, show us an indulgent if somewhat old-fashioned husband. The crux of the story comes when Agatha Milsom encounters a man on the staircase landing in the night during Harrison's absence from the house: she is sure it is John Munting, come down to steal her chastity, and creates an uproar. Harrison thinks it is Munting all right, but the target is his wife; and duly throws him out. The fact is that it was Lathom wearing Munting's dressing gown, out for a midnight assignment with Margaret. Munting, in the true tradition of the gentleman, takes the rap for his friend by keeping his mouth shut.

The misunderstanding is cleared up to a certain extent after Agatha Milsom is institutionalised – George Harrison is willing to dismiss the whole episode as a figment of the companion's diseased imagination. Lathom keeps up his affair with Margaret (her true nature is revealed in the letters she writes to Lathom, which are included here) as well as his friendship with the cuckolded husband: he gets so chummy with the latter so much as to stay for extended periods with him at his village hideaway. One day, he forces Munting to accompany him there against the better counsel of his conscience – to find Harrison having met his end in Agony.

The second part is mostly narrated by Paul Harrison and Munting, with brief letters and reports from the inquest inserted in between, and is the conventional amateur murder investigation. However, there is no detective with his brilliant intellect here, and the detection mostly consists of painstaking legwork. The solution, when it comes, is through fortuitous chance which nevertheless is entirely believable.

This is a very fast read: a good mystery, though not outstanding; and contains some brilliant characterisation. Sayers' capability to write in four different voices must be commended. The opposing viewpoints presented in the juxtaposed letters wrong-foots the reader, not allowing the formation of an opinion on any of the characters. This forces one to keep an open mind until about midway in the book.

Extremely enjoyable.

Review also up on my [**BLOG**](#) .

S Dizzy says

I gave this one 3 stars because Sayers is one of my all-time favorite authors. Honestly, I simply do not know how I feel about this story. There was definitely some drama which kept me turning the pages and it was an interesting premise - a series of letters from different POVs to tell a story. The ending was (to use this word again) interesting.

Kevin Shoop says

I love "artifact" books like this. My favorite Sayers book so far.

Craig Monson says

This is not your usual Dorothy Sayers: no Lord Peter Wimsey, no Lord Peter's idiosyncratic butler, no Harriet Vane. It does not even appear among the novels listed on her Wikipedia biography (though it does crop up on Wikipedia's "List of Works by Dorothy L Sayers" page). This may be because she shared authorship (on the title-page, if not always the cover—publishers presumably wouldn't risk hurting sales?) with Robert Eustace, who apparently sorted out the scientific complexities that loom large in solving the mystery toward the end. Although Sayers judged the book a flop (interestingly enough), it nevertheless seems to have sold well—my yellowing, 30-year-old paperback had been through 9 printings since 1964, and the original 1930 edition, through 11, apparently.

It has the air of a literary experiment: 130 pages of documents, chiefly letters in which characters with various axes to grind, aberrant psychologies to act out, and misdeeds to disguise, offer their own spins on the facts (or alternative facts) of the story. Ninety pages of "analysis" follow, still largely in the form of letters by characters from part 1, determined (or reluctant) to sort out what really happened.

We come to know the characters exclusively through what they say about themselves and others in all these writings—a lot of it between the lines. And it offers little of the wit and lively repartee one expects of the Peter Wimsey crowd, though some characters work very hard at being clever. The author(s) seem less concerned than usual with creating a very likeable or sympathetic bunch (less troubling to publishers in 1930 than today?).

Readers intrigued by the underlying premise, ardent admirers of Sayers' literary gifts, and academic narratologists may like it most. Others may wonder uneasily if Dorothy Sayers got it right.

Cassandra says

This was a very unsatisfying epistolary novel, as it had neither the sort of resonance about the difficulties of

dealing with crime that I like, nor a mystery I found particularly mysterious -- things are very much as they seem, despite some suggestions that they might not be. It was well enough written, but I felt throughout that Sayers was more interested in the philosophical ideas of one of her narrators, which left the dynamics feeling artificial. It is hard to get at that, but I would say, the weight that character's letters got, in the whole collage, was too much, so that he becomes the viewpoint character, but then it is not quite enough for that, as he is not the one driving the story, and all of this because Sayers was expressing some theology she was concerned with.

On the other hand, I am very glad I read it; it was clearly inspired by the Thompson/Bywaters case which led to several other books from the period as well, and that has given me some thoughts on what I might want to do in graduate school. So from that direction, this book deserves 5 stars; I badly needed some clarity.

Susan says

I love Dorothy L. Sayers, Lord Peter Wimsey's novels, so was keen to try this stand alone story. "The Documents in the Case," literally tells the story of a crime through a collection of letters, between a cast of characters, as well as written statements, newspaper clippings and other documents.

Our story begins in 1928, when a young artist, Harwood Lathom, and an aspiring novelist, John Munting, take the flat upstairs from the Harrisons. Mr Harrison is an engineer and amateur painter, with a passion for cooking; particularly with fungi gathered in the wild. His second wife, Mrs Harrison, is younger, emotional and bored. Her middle aged companion, Agnes Milsom, is highly strung and enjoys crafts. At the beginning of the book, it mainly Agnes voice we hear, as she pours out her interest about the two young men who have moved upstairs and the change it brings into the Harrisons lives.

However, of course, this is a crime novel, and, with a love affair, comes a motive for murder. The second half of the book involves Mr Harrison's son from his first marriage, Paul, who returns from working abroad to try to get to the bottom of the crime.

This is an unusual, and original, read. We get to know the characters almost from a distance and all of the petty annoyances of neighbours, living together, marital life and family relationships are brought under the microscope. I found this a very enjoyable mystery and enjoyed Sayers voice and characters, as she deftly unveiled the story. She really is one of the best crime writers of all time and this is every bit as good, in my opinion, as her Wimsey novels.

mark monday says

interesting, unusual entry in the dorothy sayers mystery cannon, one that surprisingly does not feature peter wimsey, harriet vane, or, alas, bunter. basically a series of letters, the mystery unfolds amongst much light satire and amusing character bits. it is intriguing to see how the various letters often contradict one another, rashoman-style.

Abbey says

1930, Dorothy L. Sayers & Robert Eustace

Epistolary novel concerning a possible murder, and the lengths a son goes to, to find out what really happened; slow-moving classic tale, not one of Sayers' best - three-and-one-half stars.

Told from a variety of viewpoints via letters and court documents, this is the sad tale of a mis-matched married couple, and the neighbors who turn their lives upside down. Mr. and Mrs. Harrison are a nice suburban couple - he rather older than she, and neither understanding the other's point of view much. Mr. Harrison is set in his ways, and his much younger second wife is finding it hard going living with him, but things seem to be ambling along in their lives fairly decently, until two young men move in upstairs - a moody would-be novelist, and a charismatic young painter. Together they, and the Harrison menage, get very mixed up and upset concerning "relationships", and the end result isn't good for Mr. Harrison.

We get to see the four main characters through the eyes of each of them via correspondence with the others and some court documents, and of a couple of the peripheral characters as well, beginning with the loopy "companion/help" for Mrs. Harrison - she's a middle-aged, quite repressed spinster lady with peculiar ideas about romance. Although she manages to stir up a great deal of trouble, she and Mrs. Harrison get on very nicely, and it's her account of the young men that we first see. Her perceptions of the situation from her quite partisan viewpoint sets the tone for what evolves into a rather peculiar story, extremely slow-moving and moody, but interestingly constructed nonetheless.

Near the end of the novel Ms. Sayers spends one enormous chapter expostulating on "The Meaning of Life, Spirituality, Chemistry, and The Universe" amongst several academics and one of the main protagonists, and this is stultifyingly boring. It's meant to show an important clue to the solution of the mystery, but is so complexly set out that it's entirely bewildering. I gleaned the intent from the later information in the story, and wish she'd mostly eliminated that chapter - it was very wearing!

Anyway, various odd things happen in the inter-relationships between Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, the companion, the artist, and the novelist, and later with Mr. Harrison's son Paul, who questions his father's peculiar death. Beautifully plotted, and mostly smoothly written, this is still awfully boring - tremendously boring in spots, particularly the medical/biological information necessary the authors felt necessary to solve the mystery is obscure and convoluted (presumably this was Mr. Eustace's contribution to the book). It really drags the pace (and the plot) down, and almost sinks the book.

It's an interesting attempt at a different sort of story for Sayers, and almost works, but not quite. Perhaps it seemed a better story when epistolary novels were rather more popular? I am admittedly not much of a fan of them (excepting *Dracula*, of course). *DOCUMENTS* is somewhat entertaining, in a mild and quietly interesting way, but not anywhere near Sayers' best work.

Damaskcat says

This isn't a Lord Peter Wimsey mystery. It consists of a series of letters, statements and newspaper reports and you really do have to pay attention to all the clues to work out who did it. The story focuses on a house in which an ill-assorted group of people live. The Harrisons own the house and employ a Miss Agatha Milsom as companion to Mrs Harrison and then two young men share the attic rooms.

The reader is given insight into their lives through a series of letters though it is revealed at the start of the book that one of the inhabitants is dead. The dead man is found dead in a shack in Devon where he appears to have eaten poisonous fungi. But he is an expert in such things and would never have picked, cooked and eaten a poisonous variety.

The only person who thinks it might have been murder is the dead man's son who has assembled the documents in the case. This is an intriguing read and the solution is ingenious though I don't claim to fully understand the science. This book is something of a curiosity and I think it is a book which grows on you with each re-reading. This is the second time I've read it and it made much more sense to me this time and I am starting to appreciate how clever it actually is.

Mary says

Brilliant mystery .

Very cleverly done by letters .

Was it suicide or was Harrison murdered ?

Beautifully written with suspense!

Lyn (Readinghearts) says

I picked this book for several reasons. I like mysteries, I have always wanted to read something by Dorothy L. Sayers, it fit into a challenge I was doing, and the premise looked interesting. As it turns out, I was a bit disappointed as the book is completely different from what I expected. The book is a mystery told through documents that were submitted to the police for review. This method is interesting as it gives the points of view of several different characters who were involved to some degree in the events, however, it made for a somewhat choppy story. In addition, the actual death and mystery surrounding the death play second fiddle to the real point of the book, which is a dissertation on the theories of creation and evolution. In fact, the discussion soon turns to theorizing on whether science will ever be able to manufacture life or not, and why the various characters feel the way that they do on this subject. A lot of the discussion is filled with technical data regarding cloning, physics, the manufacture of organic compounds using inorganic compounds, and a whole lot of stuff that my son (who is a bioengineering major) would understand, but went over my head! What I did find was interesting, was the fact that they were discussing the pros and cons of cloning life as far back as the 1930s.

I would recommend this book more for people interested in that discussions of creationism vs evolution, and the possibilities of bioengineering, rather than mystery fans. I thought the mystery storyline itself was weak. It was easy to figure out who did it and why, the real mystery was how/whether they would be caught.

I gave it three stars because of the interesting discussions on life.

Tijana says

Glavna mana ovog romana ?ak i nije u tome što nema lorda Vimzija (mada bi on svakako popravio stvar) nego prosto u tome što Doroti Seiers nije bila sigurna da li želi da napiše krimi-roman ili društveni roman ili malo da propoveda o bolestima savremenog društva i ?ovekovom odnosu prema Bogu. I na kraju smo tako dobili nezadovoljavaju?i krimi? u kome samo pokušavamo da saznamo *kako* je zlo?in izveden jer znamo i ko i zbog ?ega, i nekoliko podužih digresija na razne teme od religije do biohemije koje su u romanima o Vimziju mnogo bolje uklopljene i srazmernije dužine, i sporedne li?nosti koje takore?i preotmu pola knjige jer se Doroti baš namera?ila da nam pokaže užasne efekte psihoanalize na zlobne usedelice i... tako. E da, simpatični likovi su ovde dati baš na kašičicu i nažalost su prili?no bleđi.

Roman Clodia says

Is this the only Sayers mystery novel not to showcase Lord Peter? I'm not sure but it marks a whole other direction that Sayers could have taken in her writing.

Made up of 'the documents in the case': primarily letters, reports and a couple of witness statements, there is no overall narrator who pulls the whole story together and yet the reader is intriguingly drawn into not just the murder but the lives, inner and outer, of the characters involved.

Very much of its time, this gives an intriguing view of London in the 1930s when artists were still Bohemian and therefore morally suspicious, when the whole-food/healthfood/natural food thing was just absurd and ridiculous, and when there was a huge intellectual ferment over quantum theory/chaos theory and what that means for religion and life. I'm making this sound incredibly intellectual and dull but trust me it isn't: these themes are woven very skillfully into the narrative, but this is fundamentally a story of the clash of people and the resulting murder.

The characters were well drawn, if stereotypical: the slightly mad spinster with an obsession with sex, the modern young novelist with his intellectual theories, the beautiful but dim wife married to an engineer much older than her, the morally dubious but brilliant artist... and yet while we read the book we believe in these people.

If you want a slap-bang murder on page 1 with lots of blood and gore, then this probably isn't the book for you; but if you want a light, yet entertaining read, with an ingenious murder at the heart of it, then I recommend this.

Lisa Brantly says

wow! Not what I expected, but really good. I do understand why some wouldn't like it though. I'm sorry there weren't more of this kind of series
