

Bestseller Victorian Mystery Fiction Author ANNE PERRY

Overcomes A Past Of Her Own

by Janet Chester Bly

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*By eschewing modern morality in her characterizations,
Perry makes her people live with a realism that enlarges her fiction.*

Donald Maass, *Writing the Breakout Novel*

Mysteries in a Victorian Garage

A budding writer friend and I first encountered Anne Perry's works on an autumn day at a garage sale in southern California. Research and classic books had been advertised and we had to take a peek.

We drove up a culdesac filled with blooming chrysanthemums to an old Victorian style house with charming Georgian windows that had been converted to apartments. Several water-sucking eucalyptus landscaped the place. A sign for the sale pointed to a back garage crisscrossed with tables filled with the usual flea market type fare—old magazines, small appliances, curtain rods. But with surprises.

Cookbooks featured English recipes such as game pie and Bubbles and Squeek. Stacks of white dinnerware, service for 12, with gold gilt edges and handles were displayed on card tables. The plate bottoms had been stamped or engraved Hampton & Sons. We marveled at carved oak chests, chairs and tables that seemed more suited for an auctioneer's discerning gavel or a quality antique store's exhibit. And a large collection of teapots.

The place smelled of lavender and peppermint. With a wide fireplace and bay window, the place could count as almost comfy. Four dogs bounded over to jump and sniff—a pitbull, who turned out to be the most placid of the bunch and returned to lay down next to a huge red plastic bowl with the name Scuff, two miniature dachshunds who yipped after us, and a cocker spaniel who kept trying to maneuver between them. A huge and very colorful parrot screeched like a hurt child. My friend, being very cautious of flying things with claws, backed away.



Novelist Anne Perry

"Hush, Runcorn!" scolded a gray-haired man with the most remarkable sideburns that reached nearly to his mouth. He noted with a pitch of pride, "That one's a macaw."

I noted the uncaged bird had no restraint, so kept an eye on him during our stay.

The books lined the walls in the back of the garage. A hammock hung from the rafters next to a hospital clean bed with white sheets where a shriveled woman with cornflower blue eyes perched. A pink robe with crimson butterflies tucked around her. I wondered with a start if this couple and their menagerie lived in this space.

"They're movin' us out," she said, then repeated her mantra over and over. "They're movin' us out," giddy one moment, with a scowl the next. The macaw squawked for emphasis.

Uncomfortable, we quickly bought a 2-volume Britannica Dictionary for \$2.00 and a stack of oversized art books on Norman Rockwell, Renoir and Monet for \$1.00 each. Then, my friend noticed at least a dozen hard cover novels, all authored by Anne Perry, and tagged \$25.00.

"Do you mean \$25 for the set?" we asked the man.

"No, ma'am," came the curt reply.

I looked closer. Some had dark stains like coffee, rips on covers. Ink and pencil markings edged many of the pages. "Are these autographed copies? First editions?"

"No, ma'am."

Amused, my friend tried a tease. "Do you really expect to sell these books at that price?"

"No, ma'am."

"You can buy these brand new for cheaper than that," I commented.

The man bristled with tension. His English accent got more apparent. "Monk and Pitt are worthy of it. Them there's me family. The Monk books tell about 1856 onwards . . . then the Pitts from 1881 onwards . . . then the Reavleys in World War I. It's all in there, what we've done, who we've been. I've read every word of it to me own mum." He stopped, breathing hard, like he'd been defending his very life and kin.

"So, why are you selling them?" I asked.

He took our money and the set of his jaw made his face like plaster. "I'm not." He marched to the back of the garage, patted the elderly woman on the knee, then hefted the Anne Perrys into an ornate standing closet. Runcorn the macaw perched on his head and the dogs yapped around his feet. He turned a key on a lock and tucked it in his pocket.

WHY FANS LOVE ANNE PERRY

"I can't remember the last time I became so attached to characters in a book."

"I feel as if the Reavleys are good friends of mine and I'm saddened that I'll not be able to hear anymore from them."

Anne Perry's characters engrave the mind like those of Charles Dickens. They seem to "reach out and immerse you in their story." There's charming oddities such as Scuff, a young mudlark; Sutton the ratcatcher; and Snoot, Sutton's clever terrier. Readers can't get enough of them. For instance, the memorable character of Aunt Vespasia, clever aristocrat and sleuth from the Thomas Pitt Series with her trademark lavender gray gowns, was featured in Perry's *A Christmas Journey*.

Anne has perfected the street slang and Cockney dialect dialogue.

'Poor creature,' Orme said softly. 'S'pose we'll never know wot made 'er do it. Mebbe 'e were breakin' orf an engagement, or somethin'.' From *Dark Assassin*

A former police detective, William Monk of The Monk Series is frustrated by the lingering traces of amnesia caused by an accident and gradually learns what an abrasive, ruthless, though courageous, rascal he was. Meanwhile, Monk tries to understand why one of his persistent enemies is Superintendent Runcorn and wrestles with the tension that bristles in his interactions with nurse Hester Latterly. Hester, a feisty, independent young woman known for

her fire and feminism, served with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War and becomes Monk's partner to help solve crimes.

Tenderness develops between warring couple opposites, especially William Monk and Hester, Thomas Pitt and Charlotte, and become what some consider the sweetest in literature. However, these are not fairytale versions of love. Honest, daily nitty-gritty reality governs the relationships.

Anne supplies insight into people's motivations for why they do their deeds, whether aggressor or victim. A reader comments, "Even when one can scope out who the murderer is the reasons are hidden and a great surprise when revealed."

She works for change in her characters and that helps provide deep connection for fans. Readers don't forget the Monks and the Pitts and the Reavleys and hate to part with them. They come alive in her books.

"For me characters have to change," Anne says, "or I will end up writing more or less the same stories. And if one doesn't change, one is in a sense, dead. No arc of growth equals no real inner story."

Anne's admired for her historical accuracy. Descriptions seem so real when she includes lots of little household details of the era, life as it was in the Victorian 1800s. We learn of Cumberland sausage, toast, and jam made of witherslacks or brambles known as black kites. She includes recipes on her website. "I appreciate that I am being educated in English History of the time," a fan notes. Anne seems to know all things Victorian and makes that era "sprightly and alive." Even so, her World War 1 Series has moved countless readers with the descriptions of the horrible conditions and terrible losses for so many families in so many different countries. It has even been deemed her "most satisfying."

What are you going to teach your children? Are you going to teach them honour and chastity and how to care for others and be loyal and patient and decent? Or how to take anything you can for yourself, make sure you know all of your rights . . . and none of your duties. From *We Shall Not Sleep*

Anne responds to readers on her "Ask Anne" web page, even when they critique what they consider mistakes and discrepancies. She explains what they misconstrued or readily owns up to her "lapse of memory." Her readers feel close to Anne, the writer.

"It is really you we appreciate, you the human being that puts the heart into the pages and you the heart that puts the human being into the story."

"You seem like a friend I'd like to visit."

But Anne Perry's had to deal with a past of her own, every bit as daunting and colorful as her leading characters. What a shock for many when in the 1990s it was discovered that the renowned author Anne Perry had done time in prison as Juliet Hulme, the 15-year-old from New Zealand who conspired with a close girlfriend to kill her friend's mother. The case and the infamous trial inspired the 1994 movie *Heavenly Creatures* starring Kate Winslet (*Titanic*). Anne relates on her website about this troubling period of her life:

. . . after the tragedies and errors of my childhood about which I have already said all there is to say, I took my stepfather's name of Perry, and Anne Perry is not a pen name but my legal and only name. . . I am very grateful to that vast majority of generous people who allow me to move on and leave that grief behind.

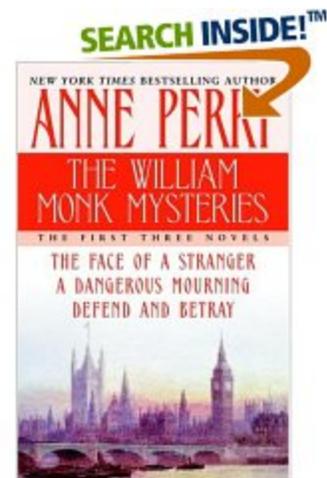
Meanwhile, Anne's not afraid to explore social and ethical issues. She provides unflinching portrayals of abuse victims and their perpetrators. Her female characters "seem to shatters the myths of the proper, vapid, dependent middle to upper class Victorian lady that has become a common stereotype." She may not try to cure the world's ills, but she's well aware of the evils. In the world she creates, it's not "too dark" and good always wins. Many of her books delve deep into the poverty and posh sides of England and can be rated a type of social history. She includes a wide variation of class covering the whole spectrum of Victorian London life, the contrast between the glamour and the squalor. In stories such as *Long Spoon Lane*, there's parallels with modern terrorism and she challenges her readers to see if they agree with the possible inherent problems and moral dangers, as it relates to today.

"Every side of issues raised is explained or explored so thoroughly that I find myself sometimes having difficulty trying to decide where I stand. Ms. Perry's ability to make you understand every facet of the then current morality and events is phenomenal. And then it hits you, history does repeat itself because so much of what she writes about can be related to today."

Perry digs deep into the inner chambers of her characters and yet spins with suspense and the ultra perspective bender of motives. Her unpredictable plots deal with the themes of the crux of love and hate, cowardice and courage, good and evil.

No matter which series she's writing about, Perry is really exploring issues of guilt and redemption, widening her scope to a global scale that gives her much more than just nineteenth-century London to worry about.

-- *The Boston Globe*



ANNE PERRY, a historical/Victorian mystery writer (The Monk Series, The Pitt Series, The WW1 Series and others), has sold over 20 million copies of her books worldwide to enormous critical and popular acclaim. Anne won an Edgar Award in 2000 for her short story "Heroes" (also nominated for a Macavity Award) and the Herodotus life time achievement award. She was selected by The Times (London) as one of the twentieth century's "100 Masters of Crime." Read more about her at www.anneperry.net

Janet Chester Bly has authored eleven books including *Awakening Your Sense of Wonder* and *Hope Lives Here*, plus she has co-authored eighteen books with her husband, award-winning western author, Stephen Bly, which includes *The Hidden West Series* and *The Carson City Chronicles*. Check her out at <http://www.BlyBooks.com>.