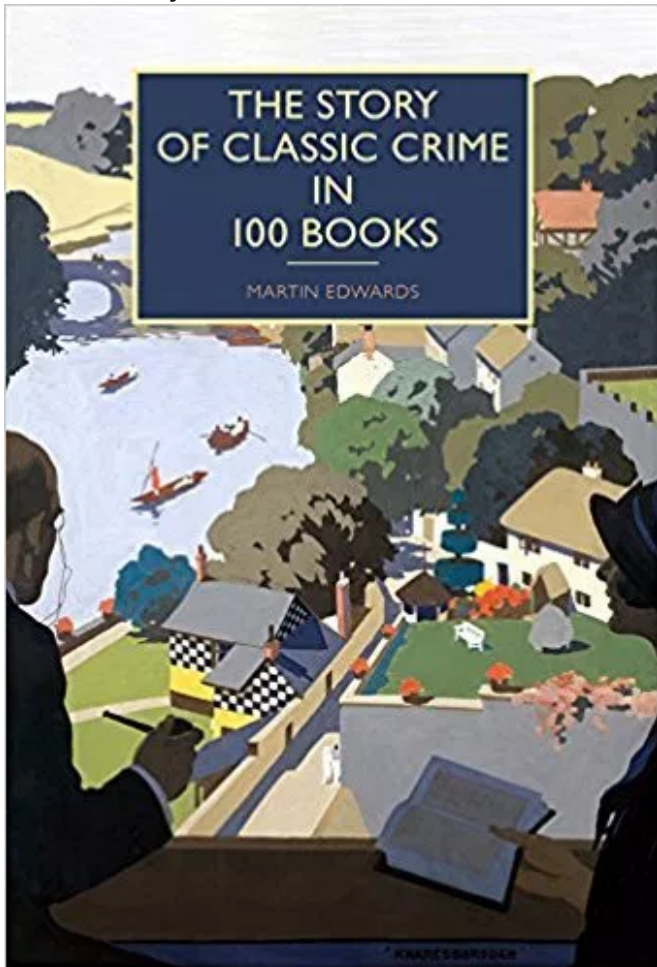


Northern Reader

A book blog by Joules Barham

The Story of Classic Crime in 100 Books by Martin Edwards – the Review

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This is a very, very good book. It works on so many levels; as a readable text, a history of Crime writing, and a reference book for anyone who collects and reads British Library Crime and Dean Street Press classic crime books. I was thrilled to receive a review copy of this book for the reasons above, and it proved an enjoyable and in depth read.

Basically this book is a run through the major fictional crime books of the twentieth century. Although there a hundred books mentioned in the title, there are dozens, probably hundreds mentioned in the text to explain and reinforce the headings. The chapter headings, which include such phrases as “Making fun of murder” and “Playing politics” demonstrate a lively style which carries on through a detailed examination of such sub-genres as

‘inverted’, ‘impossible’ and ‘locked – door’ crime stories, as well as the popularity of using real life crimes as the basis for fictional treatment. These headings are also familiar to anyone who has read such collections of stories from the British Library series as “Murder at the Manor”.

I am happy to report that the book is full of information/commentary/references to women authors, which is not always the case with ‘books about books’. I have not counted yet, but the stars such as Christie, Allingham, Simpson and others are well represented, with many reviews of Christie’s books in particular. Dorothy L Sayers not only gets credited for her books, but also her role in founding the Detection Club and her influential reviews collected by Edwards in “Taking Detective Stories Seriously”. Edwards also makes clear where women have adopted a male non de plume, or have written books jointly. I have not done the maths but I am fairly confident that all the brilliant women writers are fully recognised!

Edwards has obviously a great breath of knowledge of his subject and the confidence to write critically and persuasively about the history of these books. Such diverse groups as clergy get honourable mentions, as they spend hours puzzling over “a variety of matters which would puzzle many a businessman”. Books such as “Gaudy Night” are not in the hundred, but get mentioned as “a love letter to Oxford”, which really sums up the book.

Edwards is trying to flesh out and produce evidence to back up his argument for the nature, importance and popularity of classic crime that he set out in “The Golden Age of Murder”. The hundred titles effectively receive mini reviews, with references to other relevant books, and authors are mentioned in terms of sadness on occasion that they did not produce more stories, and comments which show their development of themes. I think that one of the achievements is to write about all these books without revealing the end, which is a huge success as he provides enticements to read the stories without spoiling them. This is a useful book for anyone interested in fictional crime as a reference book, and an excellent read for those who just want to expand their enjoyment of this popular genre.

So, do get hold of a copy of this book if you possibly can. It is great to recognise so many books from the British Library series, as well as look forward to many to come. Thank you, Martin, for letting me see a copy of this book, for being such a major part of this fantastic series, and providing a great guest post!