

Chancellor Dharker,

Nearly a century and a half ago, a short piece of fiction was published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, a piece of fiction which changed the shape of the literary landscape. Modestly reviewed, the story received little public attention at first, and for good reason: it is a rather convoluted account of a retired Anglo-Afghan War veteran and his flatmate who become entangled in the aftermath of a forced marriage in Utah some decades previous. This rather fanciful story is Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, the first of the Sherlock Holmes stories.

Arthur Conan Doyle began a tradition of writing, one that continues on in television and film, a tradition which focuses on the figure of the detective, and which shows no signs of abating: Hercule Poirot, Adam Dalgliesh, Philip Marlowe, Columbo, John Rebus, Benoit Blanc. These detectives take their cue from Holmes with their eccentricity, with their focus often on large urban centres like London and Los Angeles, and with their seemingly uncanny ability to pull together the threads of a crime to reveal the perpetrator. They are also all men.

Now, what if someone wrote about a woman who was a detective? What if someone wrote about a woman detective who didn't live in the large urban centres, but lived in the North East? A woman detective, who – time and time again – did the difficult work of being a woman in a man's world, and who stood up for social justice, and for justice generally; who looked out for those who often had no one else to look out for them?

Today we are honouring Ann Cleeves, who has done precisely this. Ann's (soon-to-be ten) Vera Stanhope novels play with the longstanding tradition of the urban male detective, and disrupt our prejudices as readers of what a detective should be like. It is Vera's commitment to justice, at no matter what cost, and her recognition that the small details matter the most, which help

her to solve crime. The television adaptations – with the role of Vera acted by Brenda Blethyn – began in 2011, and the twelfth series of *Vera* was filmed this past spring. The Vera novels, and television series, have brought the North East to global attention. Indeed, the Vera novels are a love song to the North East, with an attention to space and landscape, which speaks to Ann's deep emotional understanding of this place that we all call home.

Ann has done the same for the Shetland Islands. Her two quartets of novels about Shetland speak to this love of place, and her extraordinary ability to detail the rippling effects of a seemingly inconsequential action on a community. The first Shetland novel, *Raven Black*, was awarded the Gold Dagger by the Crime Writers' Association for the best crime novel of the year. The Shetland novels – and their television adaptations – breathe new life into the longstanding British tradition of the country house murder mystery, with its limited number of suspects in a house cut off from the outside. One could argue that a subarctic archipelago over 100 miles north of the Scottish mainland is fairly limited in terms of suspects. These novels are also a rich social history of the Shetlands in the last twenty years, with the challenges and opportunities brought by oil money, tourism, and the expansion of the tech industries. As Val McDermid says of Ann, "nobody does unsettling undercurrents better."

Ann worked as a probation officer, as a bird observatory cook, and as a women's refuge lead, before she took up writing. Her commitment to reading and writing is unparalleled. She set up reading groups in prisons as part of the 'Inside Books' project, and was Cheltenham Literature Festival's first reader-in-residence. In 2016, she was appointed a National Libraries Day Ambassador. As she said then – and this is so relevant to all of you graduating with a humanities degree today – "if we believe in equality of opportunity we must fight not just for library buildings but for the range of books inside and the skilled staff who can promote reading in all its forms." Last year, she began a 'Reading for Wellbeing' project with local authorities across the North East. This ground-breaking project enables Community Reading Workers to

support local people in some of the most disadvantaged communities to access books, and to experience the pleasure of reading.

Earlier this year, Ann was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year Honours for services to reading and libraries. In 2017, she was awarded the Cartier Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers' Association – its top honour for authors who have made an outstanding lifetime's contribution to the genre, and she joined the ranks of previous awardees, such as P.D. James, John le Carré, Ed McBain, Sara Paretsky, and Ian Rankin. Take that, Arthur Conan Doyle.

I have mentioned the longstanding tradition of the male detective. But there is another tradition to mention – that of the female author of detective fiction. Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Josephine Tey, Ruth Rendell, Val McDermid, Ann Cleeves. These are our Queens of Crime, and these women have been the backbone of not just British detective fiction, but British writing generally over the last hundred years. Women, it seems, are very good at crime.

I would ask you to think upon Ann's words as you go out into the world to make change, and to champion the value of the humanities: reading and libraries "encourage us to be more tolerant and better informed."

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her extraordinary writing career, her tremendous advocacy work for reading, writing and libraries, and her celebration of the north, I present to you Ann Cleeves, OBE, as a candidate for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Stacy Gillis, Public Orator

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