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Also by Kate Charles

A Drink of Deadly Wine
The Snares of Death
Appointed to Die
A Dead Man Out of Mind
Unruly Passions
Strange Children
Cruel Habitations
Evil Intent
Secret Sins
Deep Waters
False Tongues

EVIL
ANGELS
AMONG THEM

KATE CHARLES



Marylebone House

First published in Great Britain in 1995 by Headline Book Publishing

This edition published in 2015

Marylebone House
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.marylebonehousebooks.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-910674-15-4

eBook ISBN 978-1-910674-16-1

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Manufacture managed by Jellyfish

First printed in Great Britain by CPI

Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

Dedicated with love to the memory of

GARETH GRIFFITHS

28 March 1954 – 28 August 1994

*For while he lived, he counted himself a happy man:
and so long as thou doest well unto thyself,
men will speak good of thee.*

Psalm 49.18

The Book of Psalms mysteries: looking back, looking forward

It's difficult for me to believe, but it has been 25 years since I began writing *A Drink of Deadly Wine*, the first novel in what would become 'the Book of Psalms mysteries'. Contrary to what readers may believe, in my experience writers of fiction don't very often reread their own books – they are too focused on the future to have time for the past, too concerned with what comes next to worry about what has been. So the republication of this series of novels, 25 years on, has provided me with a rare opportunity to revisit a world I once inhabited totally, the world of the Church of England in the early 1990s.

In so many ways, the early 1990s belong to a long-gone past. Young readers today might find that past laughable, if not totally incomprehensible. Those years provide the context of the books: my characters live in a world which is, first and foremost, uncontrolled by technology. There are no mobile phones, and certainly no smartphones; phones are mostly attached to walls. No one listens to music on anything other than a radio or a record player, unless they're very modern and have adopted CDs. Televisions are large and bulky things. Home computers are non-existent, as are Kindles and other e-readers – not to mention iPads. People carry address books and use telephone directories. If they need information, they go to a library, and if they want to travel to somewhere unfamiliar, they look at a map.

Other differences are cultural, reminding us of how many things have changed in our society. In those books, supermarkets closed their doors by 5 or 6 p.m., and were never open on a Sunday. Pub licensing hours were strictly regulated. People smoked in pubs, restaurants and workplaces. Fox hunting was pretty much unquestioned. Laura Ashley represented the height of fashion. And 'British Rail tea' was unfailingly undrinkable.

And yet . . .

And yet, when moving into the sphere of the Church of England which these books so firmly inhabit, not so much has changed.

Yes, I can report with a joyous and thankful heart that women are now acceptable as priests in much if (sadly) not all of the Church, and by the time these new editions are published, women bishops will probably already be consecrated, or at least appointed. *Deo gratias*.

But so much remains the same, and not in a good way. Power struggles, judgemental attitudes, ‘them’ and ‘us’, gossip – it was true then, and I still see these things going on in parishes everywhere. It is the stuff of which mystery novels are made: the base human nature which puts self above others, and which manifests itself at its worst in the Church.

People often ask me why there are so many crime novels set in the Church, and this, I believe, is at the heart of it. The Church is the perfect setting for a crime novel precisely because human nature at its ugliest is most evident set against the ideal which the Church represents. And because church people are usually aware that a higher standard of behaviour is expected of them, when they are unable to live up to the ideal they have a better reason for concealment. Concealment leads to secrets, and secrets provide the perfect scenario for the crime novelist.

So when I embarked upon the series 25 years ago, I was but following in the steps of a long line of writers such as G. K. Chesterton, C. A. Alington, Victor L. Whitechurch, Ellis Peters and P. D. James, and writing in a tradition which would grow to include D. M. Greenwood, Phil Rickman, Andrew Taylor and James Runcie, among so many others.*

Why, though, the ‘Book of Psalms’?

As a member of a parish choir for many years, I have had the weekly privilege of singing the psalms, and have found them a source of incomparable richness. Especially when sung to Anglican chant, in the BCP Coverdale translation, they are replete with every human emotion, from sublime joy to utmost despair. In spite of – or perhaps even because of – their archaic language, they have a timeless resonance which speaks to me on so many levels. I have come to love them more than practically anything else in the liturgy; this series aside, there are only two of my subsequent novels which don’t also bear titles from the psalms.

* For further information on the history and tradition of clerical crime fiction, see my feature article/cover story ‘The Chief Suspect? Chesterton’ in the *Church Times*, Issue 7588, 22 August 2008.

When I began the first book, the title was a part of it from the beginning (Psalm 60.3), inextricably bound up with what I wanted to say about the characters, and about their relationships to each other and to the Church. I'm not sure why I set myself the task of finding an appropriate psalm verse as an epigraph for each chapter, but that became a challenge I enjoyed as the series progressed, and I now think it is one of the things about the series which has caused it to endure.

Another factor contributing to the longevity of these books is the fact that they are not in any way typical crime novels: yes, there are crimes in each of them, but the books are not *about* the crimes. The books are at heart about *people*, with the crimes providing a particularly potent way to set events in motion and put the characters under pressure, allowing me to explore their motivations and their actions. For this reason I find the American term 'mystery', with its additional theological overtones, to be more appropriate than the preferred British usage of 'crime novel'.

In my novels I have attempted to create and depict a consistent world, with characters who move in and out of story lines and sometimes reappear in unexpected places – much in the tradition of my favourite novelist, Barbara Pym. This presents a challenge for a writer who must also be concerned with plot: one of the unspoken rules for writing a series of crime novels is that they should be able to be read in any order, so that something in one novel does not give away the solution to a crime in another. This can be tricky with a cast of ongoing characters, but I do believe that people come to know and care about those characters.

For whatever reason, these books continue to be popular with readers. Scarcely a week passes when I don't receive at least one email from someone who has just discovered them, or has loved them for a very long time and is desperate for another. I'm hoping that these new editions will bring 'the Book of Psalms mysteries' to a whole new, untapped, group of readers who will find something about them to enjoy.

Evil Angels Among Them, revisited

I approached rereading *Evil Angels Among Them*, the final instalment of the Book of Psalms series, with some anticipation. For whatever reason, I hadn't looked at this book for many years, and had only the sketchiest recollection of what it was about. When I was writing the book, in the mid 1990s, the Church Commissioners had just lost a great deal of money through unwise investments, there was talk of congregations withholding what is now called their Parish Share (Quota, in those days), and it seemed to me that the very survival of the parish system was at stake. That was the background, and that much I did remember as I opened the book.

In some ways, I found the re-encounter quite disturbing. The book, which takes place in an imaginary village in Norfolk, deals extensively with church politics, and not in a good way. Lack of charity is evident in many of the characters, sometimes accompanied by even less desirable traits. It's exactly the sort of thing that non-churchgoers point at when they justify keeping their distance from an institution which is full of hypocrites and sinners. I was beginning to think that perhaps I'd been unduly harsh in this book, possibly even unfair.

And then today a friend of mine, a clergy widow, confided in me about a deeply upsetting communication she'd recently received from an unexpected source, and I realized anew that this sort of behaviour is not solely in the realms of the novelist. Churches are full of imperfect human beings: that is a fact. It's also the stuff of fiction, and I shouldn't apologize for that.

Power. That's what it often comes down to, especially in this novel. People who lack power in other spheres of their lives often find that the Church provides the ideal place to exercise it. To that quest for power, add a few dark secrets, and you have a recipe for a crime novel.

Evil Angels Among Them, in addition to its cast of rather unsavoury characters, has a plot so full of twists and turns that my amateur detectives, David and Lucy, are thoroughly confused! There is also a beautiful Perpendicular wool church, St Michael and All Angels, which I much enjoyed creating. Lucy discovers that most of the people who

have written in the visitors' book have commented with the word 'peaceful'. But David has the last word: 'It shows how little they know about Walston if they think it's peaceful.'

It was never my intention to finish the Book of Psalms series with this book, but life circumstances and the realities of publishing made that decision for me. Had I known it was the end of the road, I might have written the conclusion differently, with some sort of closure for David and Lucy. Since it's turned out that way, I've had to write cameo scenes in subsequent books to hint a bit about what comes next for those two characters who are very dear to my heart. I can't promise that they live happily ever after, but . . .

Kate Charles

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone at Marylebone House, especially editor Alison Barr, for giving this book a new lease of life. Retrospectively, I offer my deep gratitude to my incomparable editor, the late Sara Ann Freed of Mysterious Press/Warner Books. I would also like to thank MJO; my debt to him is beyond words.

Dramatis personae

In Walston, Norfolk

Fr Stephen Thorncroft	Rector of St Michael and All Angels
Becca Thorncroft	His wife
Harry Gaze	Verger
Fr Fuller	The sainted late Rector
Enid Bletsoe	Parishioner; Enrolling Member of the Mothers' Union
Gillian English	Newcomer to the village
Bryony English	Her daughter
Lou Sutherland	Partner of Gillian English
Ernest Wrightman	Ex-churchwarden
Doris Wrightman	Wife of Ernest; sister of Enid Bletsoe
Marjorie Talbot-Shaw	Parishioner; clergy widow
Fred Purdy	Churchwarden; proprietor of the village shop
Roger Staines	Churchwarden; village historian
Dr Fergus McNair	Village GP
Quentin Mansfield	Owner of Walston Hall
Diana Mansfield	His wife
Cyprian Lawrence	Organist
Flora Newell	A social worker
Sally Purdy	Daughter of Fred Purdy

In London

David Middleton-Brown	A solicitor
Lucy Kingsley	An artist
Adrian English	Ex-husband of Gillian English
Chloe Lansing	A toxicologist

Elsewhere

Jamie Bletsoe	Grandson of Enid Bletsoe
Charlotte Hollingsworth	Girlfriend of Jamie Bletsoe
Lord Hollingsworth	Her father
Sgt John Spring	Norfolk constabulary
WPC Karen Stimpson	Norfolk constabulary
Cynth and Lisa	Two girls in a pub
Canon John Kingsley	Lucy's father
The Hon. Patricia Willoughby	Wife of the Bishop of Malbury

PROLOGUE

Their throat is an open sepulchre, with their tongues have they deceived: the poison of asps is under their lips.

Psalm 14.5

The first phone call came just a few days after the Rector and his wife returned from their honeymoon. It was the first evening since their marriage that Stephen had to go out, to a Deanery Synod meeting in a nearby village.

At a loose end, Becca occupied herself with the newly arrived honeymoon photos, slipping them into the clear pockets of an album – a wedding present from one of his parishioners. Stephen had suggested that she write on the backs of the photos, for future reference, but Becca knew that there was no danger of her ever forgetting their honeymoon.

It hadn't been a grand honeymoon, by most standards – on a clergyman's stipend it wasn't really an option to go abroad, to the romance of Paris or Venice or even to some warmer clime than England in midwinter. But the cottage they'd rented in Somerset had been snugly cosy, and the surrounding countryside picturesque even in bleakest January. At off-season rates, they'd been able to afford two weeks, and in the slow time after Christmas it had been possible for Stephen to get away from the parish for that long.

Two blissful weeks. Becca smiled as she flipped through the photos they'd snapped with their rather posh autofocus camera, another wedding present. They'd taken quite a few photos of each other, out of doors on their daily walks over rolling hillsides, and in the cottage in the evenings, in the glow of the log fire. That was one disadvantage of a solitary honeymoon, she reflected wryly – there was no one else to wield the camera so they could both be in the pictures. One day they'd driven into Bath, where they'd found various sympathetic strangers to press the shutter release, so there were a few photos of the newlyweds together in front of the Royal Crescent, viewing the Roman Baths and feasting in a chintzy teashop. And on another day they'd visited Wells, where they'd toured the cathedral, and later they'd

climbed Glastonbury Tor. Becca looked at a picture, snapped, she recalled, by a friendly American, of the two of them, arm in arm, at the top of the tor, the countryside spread out beneath them like the map of some wintry fantasy land. Modest as Becca was, she had to admit that they made a handsome couple: both tall and slender and fair-haired, though her hair was a silvery blonde while Stephen's was more golden in colour.

Happy days, exploring the countryside. And if the days were happy, the nights, spent exploring each other, were sheer bliss. Upstairs at the cottage, in the tiny bedroom under the eaves, together they'd discovered joys neither of them had ever even imagined. And that, thought Becca happily, was not going to stop now that the honeymoon had ended. The pleasure of discovery, and the discovery of pleasure, would continue for weeks and months and years to come.

There were no photos of those nights upstairs – taking pictures had been the last thing on either of their minds. But there was one photo that she'd always treasure. One rainy morning Becca had awakened early and slipped downstairs to surprise Stephen with breakfast in bed, delivered on a tray. She'd remembered to bring the camera up with her as well, and had captured his surprise at the unexpected feast. In the photo he looked so young – vulnerable, almost – without his glasses and with his tousled hair flopping on to his forehead so boyishly, in the middle of the rumpled bed. The breakfast, she recalled, had been less than a culinary triumph, the egg yolks broken and the toast burnt, but Stephen had pronounced it the most delicious meal he'd ever eaten. Afterwards they'd made love yet again, as the rain beat steadily on the slanting roof just above their heads. But the bed was so deliciously cosy . . .

Her happy reminiscences were interrupted by the chirp of the telephone in the hall. Becca tucked the precious photo of Stephen into its polythene pocket and went to answer it.

'Hello?' she ventured.

There was a brief pause, then a slightly muffled male voice responded. 'Hello, my dear. How are you?'

Clearly, thought Becca, the man expected his voice to be recognised – it was something she'd grown used to when acting as secretary to her clergyman father. The voice *did* sound vaguely familiar, but she'd been in the parish such a short time that she was not yet adept at recognising the voices of her husband's parishioners. Embarrassed by her failure, and unwilling to admit it, she played for time, hoping

for a clue to the caller's identity. 'Oh, I'm very well, thank you. And you?'

There was a chuckle. 'All the better for talking to you, my dear.'

Still no enlightenment. 'I'm afraid Stephen isn't here,' she offered, certain that the man must be phoning on parish business of some sort. 'He's gone to a Deanery Synod meeting. Would you like me to have him ring you when he gets home?' With sudden inspiration she added, 'Perhaps you'd better give me your number, just to be sure.'

Another soft chuckle. 'Oh, it's you I wanted to talk to. Tell me, how was your honeymoon?'

Becca smiled spontaneously at the introduction of her favourite subject. 'Wonderful! We went to Somerset, and had such a lovely time. We went to Bath, and to Wells Cathedral, and spent a lot of time just walking in the countryside and having meals in pubs.'

'The weather was good?'

'Most of the time, though it rained one or two days.'

The chuckle again. 'I don't imagine that bothered you, though, did it? Honeymooners can always find things to do, even when it's raining.'

The first shadow of unease made Becca pause before answering. 'Oh, yes, we didn't have any trouble filling the time.'

'I'm sure you didn't. Would you like to tell me about it?'

Becca found that her mouth was suddenly dry, and her heart gave an uncomfortable thud. 'Well, um, we ...' she began, moistening her lips with her tongue. 'We found things to do.'

'Don't be so shy,' the unemphatic voice urged her. 'Tell me all about it. I want to know all the details. How many times did you do it? Did you do it on the floor, or only on the bed?'

'Please ...' Becca whispered, appalled.

Inexorably the voice continued. 'I'll bet the parson loves to touch your pretty titties, doesn't he? I'd like to touch them myself.' Another chuckle. 'Do you want to know what else I'd like to do to you?' He proceeded to tell her, unemotionally and at length.

Becca felt as if she'd been turned to stone, her hand clenching the phone to her ear as the stream of filth poured out unchecked, asking for and receiving no response. Eventually she dropped the receiver, forcing herself to take deep breaths, and covered her face with her hands. The voice went on. She snatched the receiver up again and slammed it into its cradle, then stood staring at it until it began ringing again.

