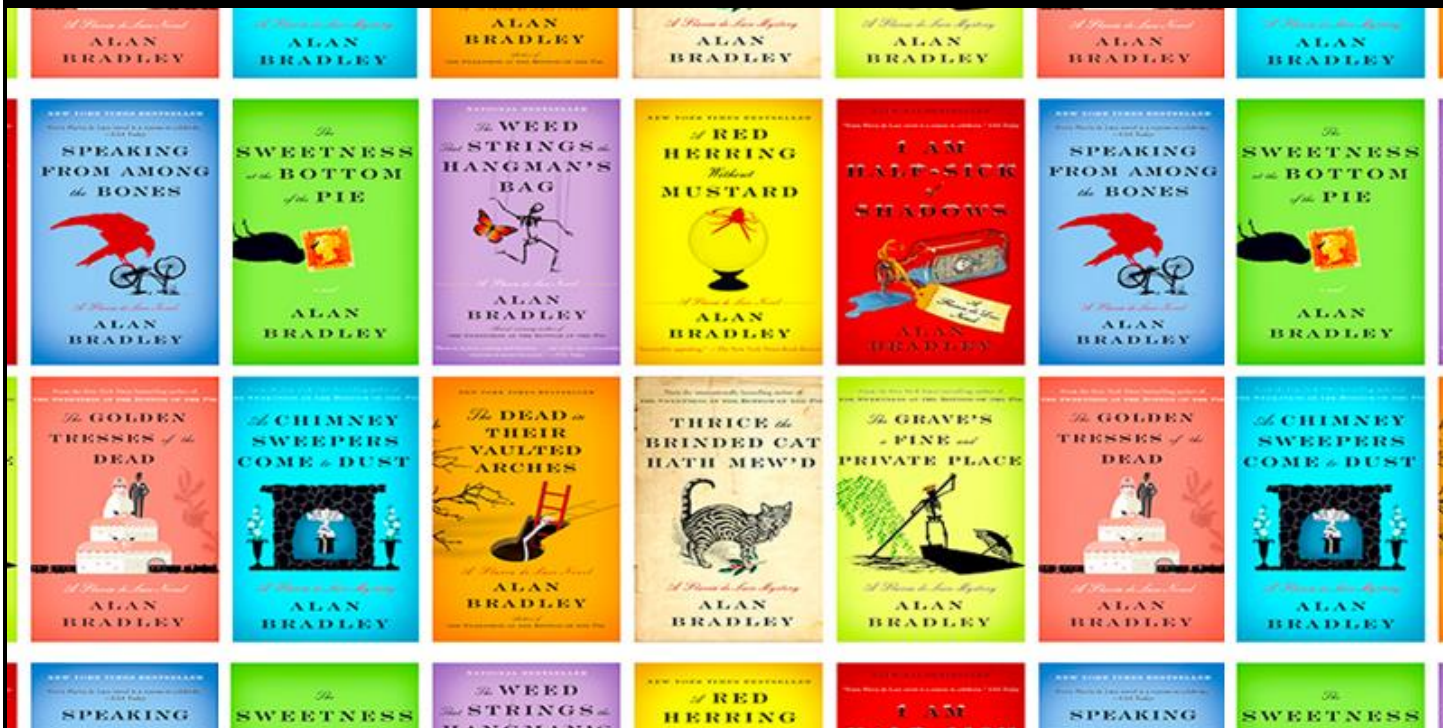


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HOW THE FLAVIA DE LUCE SERIES INVESTIGATES THE TRADITIONAL ENGLISH VILLAGE MURDER MYSTERY

On death, preservation, genius, detectives, villages, and seventeenth-century graveyard poems

JUNE 16, 2020 BY OLIVIA RUTIGLIANO

“Ha! while I gaze, pale Cynthia fades,

The bursting earth unveils the shades!

All slow and wan, and wrapped with shrouds,

They rise in visionary crowds,

And all with sober accent cry,

‘Think, mortal, what it is to die.’”

—Thomas Parnell, “A Night-Piece on Death,” 1722

I love Flavia de Luce, the precocious eleven-year-old detective protagonist in Alan Bradley's bestselling ten-part book series, which begins with the novel *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*. It's 1950 and Flavia lives with her widower father and two older sisters at Buckshaw, a crumbling estate in the English countryside that has been in the family for generations. Largely left to her own devices, she discovers a passion, and a talent for, chemistry, performing experiments with antiquated materials that belonged to a deceased relative. She develops a particular knack for experimenting with poisons, and takes great delight in using her skills to avenge herself against her sisters. And, in the first novel, when a dead body is found on the estate grounds, leading Flavia's own father to be suspected of murder, she begins her own (often chemical, sometimes practical) investigation into what might have happened.

I love everything about Flavia—her brilliance, her mischievousness, her resourcefulness, her indignant need to be considered (at least) as capable as the adults around her, her pluckiness and unflappability when encountering the morbid, and ultimately, how she accomplishes remarkable things simply to while away the long, solitary hours. And I love, in a different way, how small and lonely she feels sometimes when she wants to act like a child, or to be treated like one, and doesn't exactly know how to do it, or how to ask.

Flavia constantly battles the difficulties of not being taken seriously or believed—because of her youth, her gender, and her amateurism. These stories, for all their charm and quaintness, are pained and frustrated, too—about a bored and talented young woman who demands to be respected, as well as taught, by the adults in her life. Failed on both counts, she makes herself responsible for things that she cares about. Mysterious murders become one of them.

WHAT KIND OF PERSON MIGHT BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE OBSESSIVE YET IMPERSONAL NATURE OF THE TRADITIONAL MYSTERY?

In these books, Bradley employs the detective archetype and “traditional” murder mystery formula to highly strategic ends, not merely offering us the cozy, traditional, English village-set detective serial—in which each installment produces a murder in a vacuum and invites an investigation as a kind of exercise, overlooking the horror and existentialism that might go along with such an event in real life. But Bradley investigates this genre's semantics, and does so by spotlighting its most key feature: the detective. What kind of person might be responsible for the obsessive yet impersonal nature of the traditional mystery?

The qualities Flavia shares with Poirot, Wimsey, or Miss Marple (to name a few “traditional” detectives)

appear exaggerated in her person, because she, a child, is a fairly incongruous figure for the work that this genre entails.

This goes without saying, but to the detective in the traditional mystery, and to Flavia, the central murder is not a traumatic event—it is a problem to be solved. And Flavia needs to solve it. It puts her brilliance to use. It offers recognition. It demands that she be understood as exceptional—which is, in its own way, a kind of consolation prize for the differences that she bears and that make her life a little harder.

THE DETECTIVE STORY IS ONE OF THE MANY LITERARY GENRES THAT REFLECT HOW WE GRAPPLE WITH THE MORE TERRIFYING ASPECTS OF DYING—INCLUDING BEING MADE ANONYMOUS AND BEING MADE TO BE FORGOTTEN.

But Flavia, like many detectives, nurtures and demonstrates her genius in a manner which forms a sharp contrast to the governing conceit of all murder mysteries: death. No figure in literature comes face-to-face with death quite like the renowned murder-mystery detective. The establishment of one's genius, and the creating of a legacy, that the detective is able to do through repeated feats of extraordinary problem-solving is a way to push back against the kind erasure brought about death. The murder mystery, which principally reduces at least one person to their mute physical form and nothing else, constantly emphasizes that death removes personality, identity, and ultimately, contribution. The detective story is one of the many literary genres that reflect how we grapple with the more terrifying aspects of dying—including being made anonymous and being made to be forgotten.

Flavia is, though she might not know it, obsessed with death. She has been profoundly affected by death, and is now seemingly motivated by it. Her pursuit of mysteries can be read as a way to push back on its inevitability. To die is one thing, but to die and be remembered for remarkable feats... well, this is another thing entirely.

The Flavia books undertake these themes deeply—and do so in the first place by offering the Flavia books a legacy into a deep trail of memorable English literature. In writing the titles for the series, Bradley frequently borrows lines from canonical English poems. Books five and six both take their titles from Thomas Parnell's 1722 poem "A Night-Piece on Death": *Speaking from Among the Bones* and *The Dead in their Vaulted Arches*. Other titles include *I am Half-Sick of Shadows*, which borrows a line from

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," and *As Chimney Sweepers Come to Dust*, which is a line from the funeral song in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. I've been struck by Bradley's borrowing two of Parnell's phrases for titles; aside from their poetic loveliness, which might have been reason enough to sample them (that and the fact that they are about "death"), Parnell's poem offers an intervention into how the Flavia books superficially undertake the anxieties about death, genius, and remembrance that lurk inside the traditional mystery genre.

A man sits in a cemetery at night and thinks about the dead bodies that surround him. This is the essential premise of a short-lived genre known as Graveyard Poems, which became a minor fad during the mid-1700s. Predating the beginnings of the Gothic and Romantic movements by about half a century, this school of poetry really only had four major entrants: Robert Blair's "The Grave" (1743), Parnell's aforementioned "A Night-Piece on Death" (1722), Edward Young's "Night-Thoughts" (1742-1745), and the most famous, Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" (1750). And in all of them, the contemplation of the very physical things associated with the graveyard setting, such as the materiality of death (decaying bodies, the dirt that decays them) and commemorative architecture (headstones, tombs, coffins, epitaphs), intermingles, as you might expect, with questions about very abstract concepts, like spiritual afterlife (in heaven and on earth), history, and memory.

My personal favorite of these poems, Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," pauses to wonder about anonymity and genius, with the speaker realizing that any of the dead bodies that surround him in the graveyard might have very well been men remembered by history, were it not for certain technicalities of birth, wealth, education, or luck. He ponders, "Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen/And waste its sweetness on the desert air," adding, in the following stanza,

"Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast

The little tyrant of his fields withstood;

Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,

Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood...

"But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page

Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;

Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,

And froze the genial current of the soul.

At this moment in the poem, the speaker realizes that one (or many) of the interred men around him could perhaps have possessed one of the world's greatest minds. But the truth is lost to death, as well as obscurity. These bodies, anonymous in death, were also, the speaker speculates, likely undistinguished by education or opportunity in life. Brilliance is randomly distributed among humankind, not merely reserved for the well-connected or even the literate. But connections, money, and education would have helped illuminate what they might have been able to offer. Alas, these men did not leave their mark upon the world, and the world will not remember them.

BRILLIANCE IS RANDOMLY DISTRIBUTED AMONG HUMANKIND, NOT MERELY RESERVED FOR THE WELL-CONNECTED OR EVEN THE LITERATE.

In leading up to this thought, Gray's speaker dwells on the ways everyman has contributed to the world, and also on the equalizing power of death (that so-called great men are destined for death just as much, if not faster than, ordinary folk). His poem doesn't ultimately respond to its own fears about death, greatness, and memory; the poem ends on a sudden note acknowledging Christian salvation, which provides a hasty reassurance regarding these existential questions, rather than any sort of logical solution or even a note of peace.

But one of the most intriguing elements in his ruminations on legacy involves his brief description of the monuments that quarter the dead, which are plain and eroded. "Mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise," he writes, pitying the unknown geniuses under the worn-down tombstones in the rural parish—the ones undiscovered in life, remembered only through ritual, and then erased throughout time. An even deeper meditation on the symbolic implications of memorial masonry can be found in Parnell's "A Night-Piece on Death," which feels less grave (forgive me) than Gray's poem, mostly because it bursts with pathetic fallacy (which is a type of personification that gives human emotion to nonhuman entities). Parnell's speaker, who is also sitting in a graveyard at night, imagines the tombs, the dead, and maybe even death itself, talking to him: "When men my scythe and darts supply/ How great a King of Fears am I!" a voice says, stressing, "'Think, mortal, what it is to die."

Parnell's poem initially finds itself concerned with the paradox of remembrance; that the dead lie in "marble tombs" and under "vaulted arches—more noteworthy in death than perhaps they were in life. But this is precarious, too, because names on stones, and stones themselves, wear away too. Soon, he counts, there are piles of "Arms, angels, epitaphs and bones," commemorating life and death at the same time, all

in an anonymous jumble. But instead of falling into Gray's spiral, Parnell brings his poem to a very decisive conclusion. The King of Fears, Parnell's talking death-spirit, addresses the human angst about dying, reminding that "Death's but a path that must be trod/ If man would ever pass to God." The voice discusses mourning rituals and earthly sadness as misunderstandings of the freeing glory of death, assuring the poem's speaker not to dwell on the material loss that comes with dying, or the issue of being forgotten; that death is where suffering souls will be free to "greet the glittering sun," and experience an afterlife so wonderful, the trappings of earthly life will seem inconsequential. But all we, on earth, have to dwell on are the materials that have been left behind.

This strange, haunting reassurance comes to the speaker, disembodied and through the air. The spirit totally takes over the poem from Parnell's speaker. That we never hear from Parnell's speaker again suggests that his concerns have been allayed, or maybe even that he has died and his soul has been taken to the world beyond. Either way, earthly matters are permanently dismissed. But earlier, when the voice starts to speak, Parnell's speaker can't entirely disregard the physical remains that surround him, writing that the voice "sends a peal of hollow groans/Thus speaking from among the bones."

This image, "speaking from among the bones" is important to the Flavia stories, at least the installment which uses the line as its title—about a young church organist who meets an early demise. As with these Graveyard poems, the Flavia stories offer an exploration into how we memorialize the dead, and how we excavate genius from the dead. The dead do not talk, in the Flavia books, but solving murders requires communicating with the dead in some way, through material remains, and this is completed through science. In a world in which nature wears away all traces of man's accomplishments, a deep knowledge of science provides throws a kind of wrench into this progression, allowing for information to be extracted that can reveal the things living bodies are no longer able to say.

Flavia's impulse does not only apply to scientific intervention; in his foundational 1988 monograph *Shakespearean Negotiations*, the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt notes a similar motivation for his pursuit of historical-literary studies, reflecting that the entire field of literary criticism is an experiment in reanimation; "I began with the desire to speak to the dead... If I never believed that the dead could hear me, and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them." Greenblatt is focusing on how we construct literary arguments about

texts, but this same principle applies to exhumations of myriad varieties. That human bodies can literally tell us things about themselves one moment, and leave us to interpret them and their legacies, in the next, is a paradox that governs all murder mysteries, and especially the Flavia stories. Memory is an inadequate substitute for an actual living person, and stories are an inadequate substitute for memory. But we have to use what we have to make sense of them.

Why does Flavia, in particular, need to speak to the dead? Her urge to solve crimes might be obsessive-compulsive—a cathartic, repetitive, and highly invested response that results from a lack of closure in her own life. She is haunted by the mysterious disappearance of her brilliant mother, who vanished (and was likely murdered) while Flavia was only an infant. Harriet's body has never been laid to rest (until the sixth book, whose plot revolves around the rediscovery and delivery of the body). Harriet also has an ersatz shrine to her memory in their house, instead (Flavia's father has perfectly preserved his wife's bedroom just as she left it), while other monuments (including Harriet's motorcar and her small airplane) loom about the grounds.

Much of Flavia's development has grown around the obvious hole where a mother-figure was not, and the constant comparisons she receives that connect her to Harriet, from her looks to her fortitude, cleverness, fearlessness, and vivacity, seem to motivate her in her crime-solving; the more cases she solves, the more she can provide others' with definitive solutions. But also, perhaps, the more adventurous, keen, and cunning she becomes, the more she will animate, in herself, the mother she never had.

TO FLAVIA, DYING IS NOT ENTIRELY SAD; IT IS A NATURAL CHEMICAL PROCESS, TOTALLY COMPREHENSIBLE TO THOSE POSSESSING THE RIGHT, NO-NONSENSE SCIENTIFIC ATTITUDE.

If Flavia is determined to become the tomb for her own mother's spirit, she orients herself in this mindset, often thinking, as phrased in Parnell's poem, "what it is to die." She investigates inside graveyards and crypts, she is trapped several times underground, and she is often locked in dark places by her sisters. For all she is surrounded by death, she is not precisely afraid of it. She is brave and dogged. Moreover, she likes—rather, she is intrigued by—dead bodies, even if she has known them in life. And she can compartmentalize when it comes to this fascination; she is mostly interested in the chemical and biological properties that pertain to death. While chemical reactions can erase and destroy, they can also illuminate; the novels are very concerned with physical monuments to the dead, but they are also about how traces of and information about life are left behind, imperceptible to those without scientific training. To Flavia,

dying is not entirely sad—it is a natural chemical process, totally comprehensible to those possessing the right, no-nonsense scientific attitude.

Flavia is also haunted, in a manner of speaking, by her uncle Tarquin, a chemistry prodigy who died too young and whom she never knew—whose dusty home-laboratory Flavia has claimed as her own. Flavia recognizes that she is a wunderkind, and although she isn't arrogant about it, she also is determined to shine her brightest. She wants to impress people with her skills; it is, virtually, the only way she has figured out how to connect to people. And the English village setting for the novels allows her to be established, fairly quickly, as a local legend. Thus, the Flavia books are motivated, in a way, with a relentless, passionate pursuit of personal best and excellence; she pushes herself to solve impossible problems and she teaches herself to perfect complicated subjects to yield a kind of fulfillment, partially for their senses of finality and completion and partially because they are able to provide praise and recognition.

Flavia's still-grieving father, two dismissive teenaged sisters, and jolly housekeeper aren't necessarily up to the task of seeing her for who she truly is and what she can truly do. They get better at it, but for a while, the only person who truly is good at it, is Arthur Dogger, the de Luces' deeply shell-shocked valet whose own vast medical knowledge competes for his attention against memories of the horrifying torture he experienced during the war. He is Flavia's friend and de-facto guardian, one of the first adults to trust her skills and acumen. Flavia's aunt also becomes a surprising ally in this department. While Flavia is hounded by her need to solve these cases, and excited to demonstrate her genius, she also appears to be stuck on what it would mean for genius to be forgotten, and therefore remain unknown to the world. The Flavia books are haunted by the idea of geniuses (like Harriet, like Tarquin) who die before they peak, who die before they can leave their mark on the world.

THE FLAVIA BOOKS ARE HAUNTED BY THE IDEA OF GENIUSES WHO DIE BEFORE THEY PEAK, WHO DIE BEFORE THEY CAN LEAVE THEIR MARK ON THE WORLD.

Flavia is, it is worth reiterating, a child; for all that her mind is exceptional, her brain is also not fully developed. She is not emotionally ready for all of this, and yet she seeks it out. She is one of very many child-detectives in mystery literature, but unlike Encyclopedia Brown or even Nancy Drew or Tintin (whom I'd wager she resembles the most, in terms of stoutheartedness and a penchant for bicycle-riding), Flavia solves crimes in books, and a world, primarily intended for adults. This is why the Flavia stories

have so much weight; she is a protagonist so fundamentally unmatched for the kind of uphill climb into the tribulations of both adult life and this adult genre. And she chooses to take it, but she also makes the case so clearly for her right to take it. It's a double-edged sword; no adult should allow an eleven-year-old to shoulder the kind of cargo that she does, but she also should not be told that she is incapable or unable to tackle the problems at hand, especially when she knows that she is the only person who can truly solve them.

In their adoption of the quaint English village murder-mystery frame, Bradley's books clearly demarcate themselves as friendly more than upsetting; they are definitively not a suspense series which emphasizes the aggregated trauma of witnessing repeated violence and death. No, while Bradley's series frames how solving murders might involve psychological strain, they also express how murder-solving is a vehicle for catharsis. The child Flavia, so vulnerable and simultaneously gifted, is a kind of origin story experiment for the detectives who might grow up to be Poirot, Wimsey, Marple, et al. Bradley offers a credible reason for why a detective might land in a recurring serial format—crystallizing the detective figure as a genius who repeatedly confronts death as part of a quest for immortality.

In "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," Gray's speaker is unsettled by the idea that death comes for us all, and he is terrified of the idea that only the truly great are remembered, defining greatness as the only way to be kept alive. Flavia, our twentieth-century eleven-year-old heroine, seems to subconsciously share these concerns. But while Gray and Parnell, sitting in their churchyards at night, specifically handle their concerns about death and decay through spiritual hope, Flavia mediates them through chemistry.

Immortality is a quest brought about by the repeated demonstrations of genius, but also, in a way, it is a scientific inquiry. It is almost alchemy. And everyone gets to be a little bit immortal, Flavia learns, to the natural world that created us. That is what being a detective is, she unearths; it's finding out how people manage to live on. Because they will. In some way, they all do. It is, if you'll forgive me for saying it this way, elementary.



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