

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 33
Dorothy L. Sayers

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I'm Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage - here in Berlin and beyond.

We're still staying home, but through the magic of podcasting, you can travel with us! And in this episode, we'll be going to Münster.

Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire is with me in Berlin, well sort of, remotely from her very own living room, to tell us more. Hey Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi Susan! Yep, I can see — we're looking at each other on Skype, and talking by some method that is slightly beyond me, but it's exciting. It's lovely to see you.

SUSAN STONE: It's good, I haven't seen you in ages!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Right, so anyway, we were at the Burg Hülshoff Centre for Literature, invited by them and by the TOLEDO programme. The TOLEDO programme works on cultural exchange by and for literary translators, so obviously very close to our hearts. What we did was we put together a show for them all about Dead Lady translators, who are of course kind of triply ignored, by being dead, by being ladies, and being invisible translators.

SUSAN STONE: Indeed, and it was a great show, we had a lovely audience as well. And what's also fun is that Burg Hülshoff is named for a Dead Lady.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Exactly, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff who was a 19th century German poet.

SUSAN STONE: And we in fact got to do the show in her house, or one of her houses.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes, she lived in this house from 1826. The venue is called Haus Rüschaus, very difficult to pronounce. We got there in the dark, and we found this country house built 1748.

SUSAN STONE: It was a spooky journey, I have to admit. It was a dark and stormy night, there was a long and winding road, and there were flashlights, and possible ghost sightings, though I think it was just an employee, but it was a spooky moment.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: It was very, very strange. But we did get a lovely warm welcome from the team around Jörg Albrecht and Fiona Dumann. And it was all very period drama, right?

SUSAN STONE: It was, without the long skirts.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We wore modern clothing. So while you're listening, though you'll have to imagine yourself, you're nice and cosy in a paneled drawing room, but to get to the bathroom you have to cut through the kitchen with a huge chimney and go out into the coach house.

SUSAN STONE: Modern conveniences for a vintage location. There was also a fantastic chandelier I had to take picture of, as well as a portrait of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Aside from Dead Ladies Shows or one show to start with, the Burg Hülshoff has a lot of great events from Jörg Albrecht and his team, with lots of chances for the public to take part, and get involved, including the Lesebürger*innen, which a very cool initiative.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Right, they're a club of ordinary local people getting more involved with the Centre for Literature, right?

SUSAN: Indeed and they do some events of their own, and they do interviews with the guests who come to speak there, and they talked to us about the Dead Ladies Show, and even produced a podcast about it, and we'll have a link to that in our show notes for any German-speakers to check out right. And we're going to learn more about them in next month's show, because I spoke to them for this podcast. So yes, it is a little meta — layers upon layers, podcasts upon Dead Ladies Shows. But it was great fun.

We have two talks recorded in Muenster.. The first comes from our other Dead Ladies Show co-founder, Florian Duijsens. And Here he is, on Dorothy L. Sayers

FLORIAN DUIJSENS ON TAPE FROM HAUS RÜSCHHAUS: So chances are, if you were familiar with the name Dorothy L. Sayers — pronounced "Sairs," because, English people. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So, chances are you're familiar with her from her crime novels which you find scattered around flea markets and holiday cottages - it's very that. Books like *Murder Must Advertise* or *The Five Red Herrings*, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) or perhaps you encountered her in one of her many, many translations. But before today, did you also know she wrote on pressing questions like *Why Work?* (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Or even better *Are Women Human?* (AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND GROINS) Or wrote books like *The Whimsical Christian?* Or that she was a formidable translator in her own right?

The prolific and many-splendored Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born in Oxford in 1893, the year New Zealand became the first country in the world to give women the right to vote. (AUDIENCE WHOOPS) I know, it's embarrassing for all the other countries. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Her mother was sort of on the older side for the time, she was 37, and her father was a reverend who had gone to school with Oscar Wilde, and who was the headmaster of the boys' choir school for Christ Church Cathedral

in Oxford, where Dorothy was also baptized. Before she was five, however, her father was offered a lucrative position in the countryside — here's a quick drive-by picture. The gate used to be part of Oliver Cromwell's house, which gives you a little bit of an indication of the class she was born into.

The house had a day and a night nursery, plus nine members of staff, yet, unlike a lot of Victorian upbringings, Dorothy's was very, very warm. Every morning she'd cuddle up with her mother and be read stories, learning to read in the process and writing in beautiful copperplate by the age of five. One morning, she writes, her father appeared in her nursery, and this is where I debut my British accent. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So her father appeared in her nursery "holding in his hand a shabby black book which had already seen some service, and addressed to me the following memorable words: 'I think, my dear, that you are now old enough to begin to learn Latin.'" She is 6 years old. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) They both especially enjoyed Latin jokes like: 'Why are Roman sailors wicked?' Any Latin speakers? 'Because they are *nautae*' (AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND GROANS) That's a Dad joke and a Latin joke right there.

Soon her governesses add French and German to her repertoire, and Dorothy is reading Romantic poetry and loving *Robinson Crusoe*, especially the gory parts. At 13, however, she finds a book that really captures her heart: *The Three Musketeers*. She loves it so much that she actually divvies up the roles among the household. Her grandmother who she was a little afraid of was Richelieu, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) and Dorothy played Athos. Aside from aspiring to be a musketeer, young Dorothy also loves writing poetry, especially tricky rhyming schemes.

When she goes to boarding school in preparation for possibly heading to Oxford where the first women's colleges had started just ten years before Dorothy was born, she remains a fervent actress there and a writer, performing in Shakespeare plays, but also writing her own. In the spring of 1911, Dorothy graduates, scoring the highest in all of England in the Cambridge Higher Local Examination, earning distinctions in French and spoken German. Entering Somerville college in Oxford, she spends her time singing in the Bach choir, here she is parodying her choir director in drag, and she really enjoyed wearing eccentric earrings like parrots, and skipping class.

With the start of WWI, most of Oxford's men disappear, but with no brothers or lovers on the front lines, Dorothy isn't too bothered. In fact, she starts a club, that she tongue-in-cheek called the Mutual Admiration Society, in which she and her women friends workshop essays, poetry, fiction, and plays. Now preferring to go by DLS with her friends because she hates the name Dorothy — DLS is also the acronym for the Dead Ladies Show, by the way — (AUDIENCE APPLAUDS) anyway, she has great taste. She finishes, with honors, in 1915 though it wasn't until 1920 that she actually receives her master's degree, because it was only then that women were allowed to receive a degree. They could study, but they wouldn't receive a degree. So in 1920, she and her friends and granted their master's finally. She publishes a book of poetry, starts working on a translation of the *Song of Roland*, a 12th-century Old French text about Charlemagne's fight against the Saracens in Spain, and she spends some time apprenticing at a publisher in Oxford.

She receives her first marriage proposal, but declines, saying: “To have somebody devoted to me arouses all my worst feelings. I *loathe* being deferred to. I ABOMINATE being waited on. It INFURIATES me to feel that my words are numbered and my actions watched. I want somebody to fight with!” (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) But when she moves to a cozy new apartment, she falls hard for her frail new neighbor, who isn’t romantically interested, but convinces her to move with him to France — like you do — to teach at a boys’ school. Anyway. There, he keeps fainting off his bike, and she takes care of him. All the while, she works on a translation of “Tristan”, another epic poem from the 12th century, as well as her first detective novel.

While she manages to publish “Tristan” fairly quickly, her detective novel takes a bit longer, so she works as a freelance translator from the French, moving to London. And in London she learns how to make herself dinner, very important life skill. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) She reads up on criminology at the British Library, and starts working as a copy writer for an advertising agency. In 1923, she publishes this book, *Whose Body?*, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) her first crime novel, introducing her delightfully nimble detective Lord Peter Wimsey, whom she later described as a cross between Fred Astaire & Bertie Wooster.

She also falls for an American of Jewish Russian descent, and not only is he exotic, he’s also a published author beloved by Yeats and Ford Madox Ford. He’s also sadly a rather pretentious twat, he’s not a fan of crime fiction, and, what’s more, he’s against marriage and really into “free love”. DLS, who is not against sex before marriage – at least conceptually, as she is still a virgin at this point – balks at using condoms because they have, as she says “a taint of the rubber-shop”. The smell I guess, wasn’t for her. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) When he doesn’t want to commit, however, they break up, and DLS is distraught to learn that, not only does he marry right after moving back to the US, but he marries a crime writer. (AUDIENCE GROANS) I know. Yes.

She writes home, upset and very much on the rebound: “Dearest Mother, Don’t faint — I am coming home for Xmas on Saturday, with a man and a motor-cycle, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) with request that you will kindly give same a kind welcome and a few words of kindly cheer. It’s not anyone you know — it’s a poor devil who has been staying with the people above me, and whom I chummed up with one weekend, finding him left lonely, so to speak, and he’s been prettily grateful and has taken me out a lot on the bike. [...] His name is Bill White and [...] Intellect isn’t exactly his strong point (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) — I mean, literary intellect — he knows all about cars, and how to sail a boat and so on — and in fact he’s the last person you’d ever expect me to bring home, but he’s really quite amiable, and will be desperately grateful for a roof over his head.” Needless to say, Bill has no high-flying ideals about free love or anything like that. And although they do use protection, she gets pregnant.

Since giving a child up for adoption wasn’t legal yet, and Bill doesn’t want any part of a baby, DLS decides to write to her favorite cousin, who runs a childcare of sorts from her countryside cottage: “I have been meaning for some time to write to you

on a matter of business. There's an infant I'm very anxious you should have the charge of, and I hope very much indeed you'll be able to take it. It isn't actually there yet, but it will be before many days are over. It won't have any legal father, poor little soul, but I know you would be all the more willing to help give it the best possible start in life on that account. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) [...] I am very personally interested in the matter, and will tell you more about it later on [...] what would be the earliest possible moment at which you could take it? At present everything depends on the girl's not losing her job. Everything has been most discreetly managed — her retirement from public life is accounted for by 'illness' — but naturally she can't turn up back at work plus a baby — at least, not without letting stacks and stacks of people into the secret, which might then leak out. So you see, the sooner she could dump the infant on you and clear back to work, the more chance there [is] of there being money to support it." DLS was 30 years old at this point.

Of course, she cannot keep this charade up for very long, quickly admitting to her cousin that she is the boy's mother soon after he is born, but keeping it a secret from her friends, colleagues, and family for *the rest of her life*. Yes. It was only discovered in one of her biographies after her death much, much later. Working hard to keep up appearances and provide the three pounds a month for the upkeep of little John, whom she visits on a "Neracar" motorcycle of her own, she starts gaining weight and losing her hair, buying a dramatic gray wig and channeling all her energy in her advertising work and her fiction.

She writes to her American ex: "I've been crying for about 3 years now & am heartily weary of the exercise ... It is very irritating to have no one to whom I can boast about [my son] ... I have a careless rage for life, and secrecy tends to make me hard-tempered ... Give me a man that's human and careless and loves life, and one who can enjoy the rough-and-tumble of passion. I like to die spitting and swearing, you know, and I'm no mean wrestler! But there again — precautionary measures cramp the style, Bah! if you had chosen [me], I would have given you three sons by this time." She was not happy. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

But — in another one of her weekly letters to her parents, two years later, she drops *this* bomb: "I am getting married on Tuesday, weather permitting! (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) to a man named Fleming, who is at the moment motoring correspondent to the *News of the World* and otherwise engaged in journalism. No money, but a good job, 42 and otherwise eminently suitable and all that. I think you will rather like him." At first, the match seems to be made in heaven, their love life is a success she had gotten herself fitted with a so-called Dutch cap, he helps get her books reviewed, and not only that but he knows how to please her in other crucial ways as well, as she writes:

"I have a first-class, experienced male chef, capable of turning out a perfect dinner for any number of people, who not only demands no salary, but also contributes to the support of the household. I came across this paragon some years ago, and, having sampled his cooking and ascertained that he held sound opinions on veal (which I detest) and garlic (which I appreciate), married him. So far, the arrangement

seems to work very well, and, since giving me notice would be a troublesome and expensive matter, I am hoping he will stay.”

This of course, did not exactly help her lose weight. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) “The elephant is crated,” she would say in her later years, after she’d made her way into a friend’s car. (AUDIENCE GROANS) But her husband has health problems, a result from being gassed and shell-shocked during the War, not to mention drinking too much, and over the years he becomes less and less comfortable with his wife’s success, especially since he’s mostly unemployed. Worse, he wants little to do with her son. DLS, meanwhile, was contracted to write one Lord Peter novel a year and is still writing ad copy. Here’s a campaign she worked on for Colman’s mustard, and another very famous one for Guinness. ‘Toucans in their next agree: Guinness is good for you. Open some today and see what one or two can do.’ (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) She could also do a good Dad joke.

She compensated for her lack of money by giving it all to her detective, as she writes: “When my cheap rug got a hole in it, I ordered him an Aubusson carpet. When I had no money to pay my bus fare I presented him with a Daimler double-six [...] and when I felt dull I let him drive it. I can heartily recommend this inexpensive way of furnishing to all who are discontented with their incomes.” What’s more, she wrote herself into her books in the person of Harriet Vane, a crime writer who we first meet when she is accused of *murder*! Lord Peter takes an interest in her case, proposing marriage at their first meeting in prison. Because that’s the kind of guy her is. This is their second meeting, from a 1980s BBC adaptation starring the wonderful and alive Harriet Walter.

RECORDED TV CLIP: HARRIET VANE: Are you still going to marry me?

LORD PETER: Of course.

HARRIET VANE: Why? What’s so fascinating about me, Peter?

LORD PETER: Well...

HARRIET VANE: Is there a dark side to you, something about a murderess that draws you, excites you?

LORD PETER: It can’t be that, can it? Because I know you’re not a murderess.

HARRIET VANE: Oh, what is it then? You are bearing in mind that I’ve had a lover.

LORD PETER: Oh yes. So have I. Several, in fact. It’s the sort of thing that could happen to anyone. I can produce quite good testimonials. I’ve told I make love rather nicely. Though I am at a bit of a disadvantage at the moment. One can’t be too convincing at the other end of a table with a bloke looking through the window.

HARRIET VANE: I’ll take your word for it.

LORD PETER: Of course. I won’t always be at this disadvantage.

HARRIET VANE: But I might be at an even greater one.

LORD PETER: Don’t be so damned discouraging. Anybody would think you had no confidence in me.

HARRIET VANE: Peter, people have been wrongly condemned before now!

LORD PETER: Only because I wasn’t there!

HARRIET VANE: Oh I never thought of that!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: They’re all on YouTube. They’re a little slow, but delightful. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Just like this.

With the arrival of Harriet Vane in the novels came a slight rewriting of Lord Peter too, as DLS carefully repositioned him to be a more worthy mate. She writes: “It has been said, by myself and others, that a love-interest is only an intrusion upon a detective story. But to the characters involved, the detective-interest might well seem an irritating intrusion upon their love-story.”

As you might have gathered from those books I mentioned earlier on, DLS was a Christian, and religious enough, it has to be said, to think poorly of Judaism since they “failed” to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Later in her career she fell into writing religious plays for the stage and BBC radio because she disagreed with as she said, “the general air of stained-glass-window decorum with which the tale is usually presented.”

Instead of dry dogma, DLS wanted to emphasize the weird and the wondrous, the shocking twists and profound mysteries – the resurrection! The trinity! These are really weird things, and she wanted to make sure they were highlighted. She created quite the ruckus when she had Biblical characters speak in every-day English, like when someone suggests that Judas might have “squealed” on Jesus. Though this landed her in hot water with the tabloid press for a minute, the results were wildly popular, at times even overshadowing her other work. She was not a meek Christian though, often raising the question why the church seemed so focused on what people did in their bedrooms when Jesus would have been more interested in the sins being committed in corporate boardrooms. Hmm.

Furthermore, as she writes, Christ himself “made no difference between women & men, laid down no separate rules for female behavior”, “went to parties in disreputable company ... cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people’s pigs and property”. As someone who often dressed mannishly and did a man’s job, she also didn’t buy into traditional roles and dress codes for men and women. Here’s an excerpt from her 1947 essay: “Are women human?”

“Let us take this terrible business – so distressing to the minds of bishops – of the women who go about in trousers. We are asked: “Why do you want to go about in trousers? They are extremely unbecoming to you. You only do it to copy the men.” To this we may very properly reply: “It is true that they are unbecoming. Even on men they are remarkably unbecoming. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) But, as you have discovered for yourselves, they are comfortable, they do not get in the way of one’s activities like skirts and they protect the wearer from draughts about the ankles. As a human being, I like comfort and dislike draughts. If the trousers do not attract you, so much the worse; for the moment I do not want to attract you. I want to enjoy myself as a human being, and why not? As for copying you, certainly you thought of trousers first and to that extent we must copy you. But we are not such abandoned copy-cats as to attach those useful garments to our bodies with braces. There we draw the line. These machines of leather and elastic are unnecessary and unsuited to the female form. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) They are, moreover, hideous beyond description. And as for the indecency – of which you sometimes accuse the

trousers – we at least can take off our coats without becoming the half-undressed bedroom spectacle that a man presents in his braces.” (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

For her final, massive project, she was first inspired in 1944, when during an air raid she fled to a shelter, grabbing the first book she could get her hands on, which happened to be Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. She writes: “I can remember nothing like it since I first read *The Three Musketeers* [...] However foolish it may sound, the plain fact is that I bolted my meals, neglected my sleep, work and correspondence, drove my friends crazy, and paid only a distracted attention to the doodle-bugs — here she means: bombs — which happened to be infesting the neighborhood at the time, until I had panted my way through the Three Realms of the dead from top to bottom and from bottom to top.” So this translation preserves Dante’s really difficult *terza rima* — translators among you will be like ‘What? How?’ And she translates it for Penguin Classics, which at that point was brand new.

Even from this very brief overview that I’ve given you now, DLS had an immensely rich career, that’s clear, if also a not-so-happy love life. Yet there is one thing that seems to connect DLS’ wildly divergent passions of writing crime fiction, translating the classics, and spreading the word of God, and that is the way these passions engaged her intellect and that of her readers. Each she approached from an intellectual angle, puzzling out creative murders, tricky rhyme schemes, and paradoxical church dogma. She wrote: “Since I cannot come at God through intuition, or through my emotions, or through my ‘inner light’ [...], there is only the intellect left. And that is a very different matter [...] Where the intellect is dominant, it becomes the channel of all the other feelings. The ‘passionate intellect’ is really passionate. It is the only point at which ecstasy can enter. I do not know whether we can be saved by the intellect, but I do know that *I* can be saved by nothing else.”

In her detective novels, she also distrusted intuition, as becomes clear from the oath she helped write for the Detection Club, a group of crime writers of which she was the president from 1947 until her death. All new members of the club were required to place their hand on Eric the Skull (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) — there’s a picture of Eric, and Dorothy looking very appropriately respectful of Eric. So they had to place their hands on Eric the Skull and answer in the affirmative to the following question: “Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on, nor making use of, Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Coincidence, or Act of God?” Agatha Christie later took over the presidency of the Detection Club after DLS died quite suddenly of a heart attack in 1957, aged only 64 — she was also smoking about 50 cigarettes a day at that point — without having finished translating the Divine Comedy’s third book, *Paradise*. She did leave behind eleven Lord Peter novels, plus countless short stories, essays, and letters, not to mention over 350 reviews of crime novels that she also churned out, plus, of course, her son. I would like to leave you tonight with some of her thoughts on gender from a 1947 essay called “The Human-Not-Quite-Human”:

“Probably no man has ever troubled to imagine how strange his life would appear to himself if it were unrelentingly assessed in terms of his maleness; if everything he

wore, said, or did had to be justified by reference to female approval; [...] If from school and lecture-room, Press and pulpit, he heard the persistent outpouring of a shrill and scolding voice, bidding him remember his biological function. If he were vexed by continual advice how to add a rough male touch to his typing, how to be learned without losing his masculine appeal, [...] how to play bridge without incurring the suspicion of impotence. [...]

His newspaper would assist him with a 'Men's Corner,' telling him how, by the expenditure of a good deal of money and a couple of hours a day, he could attract the girls and retain his wife's affection; and when he had succeeded in capturing a mate, his name would be taken from him, and society would present him with a special title to proclaim his achievement. People would write books called, *History of the Male*, or *Males of the Bible*, or *The Psychology of the Male*, and he would be regaled daily with headlines, such as GENTLEMAN-DOCTOR'S DISCOVERY, MALE-SECRETARY WINS CALCUTTA SWEEP, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) MEN-ARTISTS AT THE ACADEMY.

[...] If, after a few centuries of this kind of treatment, the male was a little self-conscious, a little on the defensive, and a little bewildered about what was required of him, I should not blame him. If he presented the world with a major social problem, I should scarcely be surprised. It would be more surprising if he retained any rag of sanity and self-respect."

Suffice to say that Dorothy L. Sayers managed to retain her sanity and her self-respect until the end, and if you want to know more, you can read either *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* written by her friend Barbara Reynolds or the one by David Coomes subtitled "A Careless Rage for Life",

There is also a biography in German, called *Ich war schon immer ein robustes kleines Biest*, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) by Ingeborg Forssman. And while I haven't read these next two yet, I should note that DLS is a key figure in two group biographies: *The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women* by Mo Moulton, and *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London Between the Wars* by Francesca Wade. Or, of course, you can pick up any Lord Peter novel, you won't be disappointed. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE FROM AUDIENCE)

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Florian Duijsens on Dorothy L. Sayers, recorded live at Haus Rüschaus by Brigitte Hamar.

We will have some pictures of Dorothy for you, along with some scenes from our live shows in Muenster, including that gorgeous chandelier on our website deadladiesshow.com/podcast, or visit our social media channels @deadladiesshow for more extras.

SUSAN STONE: In our next episode, we'll be in Münster again, and Katy will be telling us about another Dead Lady Translator, Katy who is it?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: That's Willa Muir. Great woman.

SUSAN STONE: Very exciting. So look out for that. Our jaunty theme song is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me.

Thanks to Florian, thanks to you, Katy.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Thank you, Susan!

SUSAN STONE: And thanks to everyone listening. I'm Susan Stone. Bye from Berlin. Be well.

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