

The Agatha Principle and Other Mystery Stories

Elizabeth Elwood

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A theater, the 2010 Olympics, and an old plantation in Louisiana are just a few of the settings for Elizabeth Elwood's riveting mysteries in *The Agatha Principle and Other Mystery Stories*.

A collection of eight stories, the book is Elwood's fourth to feature the affable members of the Beary family. While generally not the main focus, at least one member of the family appears in each story, a device that the author uses skillfully to maintain reader interest. In this collection, Philippa Beary, a young singer and actress, is featured most prominently, as her budding relationship with a detective progresses and carries along from one story to another.

The "Agatha Principle" is explained with this theory: "The least likely person is the killer, and no one is really who they seem." The theme prevails throughout the collection, and readers will be caught up in the increasing suspense of each story, working things out right along with whichever Beary family member is highlighted. Many of the stories are of the "whodunit" variety, although "The Window in Room 21" has a ghost story element and the last tale in the collection, "The Mystery of the Christmas Train," relies on subtle humor as well as the author's ability to craft a suspenseful and effective mystery.

The dialogue reads smoothly and naturally, and each mystery is well constructed and intriguing without ever becoming predictable. While the Beary family serves as a thread of consistency from one story to the next, other characters are developed just as thoroughly and vividly. Plots progress smoothly and Elwood expertly increases the tension level as each story moves toward its satisfying conclusion.

Elwood's storytelling skills are enhanced by her ability to set a scene and capture settings, whether describing the chaos of crowds in the Olympic village or a group of retirees touring a Southern mansion. Descriptions are often colorful and even fanciful, as in the depiction of trees on the grounds of a plantation: "The solitary oaks that covered the rest of the grounds were more suited to a Gothic mystery, for their twisted branches, struggling up to the light or curving to the ground, appeared angry and tormented, as if the long arms of the trees would animate at any moment and ensnare the unwary traveller."

While some readers may find the unusually tiny font size problematic, the book has a sound structure, and it is virtually free of typos and grammatical errors.

In *The Agatha Principle and Other Mystery Stories*, the author has wisely ensured that readers can jump right in and get to know the Beary family without benefit of familiarity with the previous collections. However, once they've experienced the entertaining and engrossing stories in *The Agatha Principle*, satisfied readers are very likely to seek out the other books in the series as well.

Elizabeth Elwood is an accomplished playwright as well as an author. Currently, she is at work on the fifth collection of mysteries to feature the engaging Beary family.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (July 19, 2012)

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