A Ghost in the Machine: A Chief Inspector Barnaby Mystery by Caroline Graham

When a bloody, pulverized body is found lying beneath the rustic timbers of an authentic torture device so vicious and complicated as to be blood-curdling, there's sufficient unrest in tiny Forbes Abbot to call in Chief Inspector Barnaby. Was Dennis Brinkley done in by crooked business partners, a teenage seductress, a couple of would-be publishers who've just inherited--and then lost--millions, or perhaps by tired, timid little Benny Fraye, who wouldn't hurt a fly--would she?

Barnaby will soon find out just who set in motion the gruesome machine that crushed the unfortunate victim. Caroline Graham's delightful cozy village mysteries, which inspired the continuing Midsommer Murders series starring Inspector Barnaby on A&E Television, have long been fan-favorites; A Ghost in the Machine is sure to cement her reputation as one of the best crime writers in the mystery business today.

What a marvelous book this was! The cover of the novel likens Caroline Graham to Agatha Christie - a comparison given to all the finer female British mystery authors, even when their books are nothing like Christies. The small village settings here do resemble those in the Miss Marple stories, but there is a modern sensibility and a fine nasty streak in Graham's work that is anything but cozy. In a way, this latest in the Barnaby/Troy series is more Dickensian to me than Christie-like. In some ways, its barely even a mystery. Yes, there is a murder - two, in fact - and yes, there are a small group of suspects, one of whom is definitely responsible for those murders. But the mystery is secondary to the wonderful depiction of these characters and to the charmingly creepy
village life in Forbes Abbot. The first murder doesn't occur till late, and yet I never once felt impatient. The second victim and her family are not introduced until the middle of the book, but Graham's marvelous way with characterization made them so compelling that I accepted them into the circle immediately. I consider it high praise indeed that I could have enjoyed this story without the murders...as a comedy of manners, in and of itself.

One could almost do without Barnaby and Troy here as they appear very late in the story. (Christie used to do this occasionally with Poirot and Miss Marple, as in THE MOVING FINGER and THE CLOCKS.) But I'm so glad when they arrive because their relationship is hysterical. They are a bit different than their counterparts on the TV series (which, by the way is, in my opinion, the best detective series to come out of Great Britain!), but they have a wonderfully, sort of snarky affection for each other. Their investigation this time around isn't particularly clever, but then A GHOST IN THE MACHINE is more about the effects of events on the characters themselves than on the parceling together of clues and alibis. Watching these people change and grow as a result of their own actions and the actions of others was compelling. I particularly loved the Lawsons and their horrible daughter Polly, whose metamorphosis is highly dramatic but inherently realistic. Even the smallest of characters never gets short shrift. You feel as if you know every one of these people and have spent a wonderful time in their presence.

I would never attach a spoiler to a mystery review (or to any novel, for that matter), but I must say a word about the ending. For the final page to this book contains one of the most startling surprises I have ever read in a book of this type, and it made me put down the novel with a chill and a smile. Let's just say that Graham stretches and switches around the concept of genre here. Otherwise, my lips are sealed.

I suppose I'm preaching to the choir here, but if one stranger happens upon this review and thereafter decides to read the Barnaby mysteries, then I will be satisfied. I fear that Graham will retire from writing, and we will be without new adventures. At least the TV shows are continuing and are being made available to those of us in the States on DVD. I highly recommend them as well.

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