The Victoria Vanishes: A Peculiar Crimes Unit Mystery

I Love Christopher Fowler

It's a case tailor-made for the Peculiar Crimes Unit. A lonely hearts killer is targeting middle-aged women at some of England’s most well-known pubs—including one torn down eighty years ago. What’s more, Arthur Bryant happened to see one of the victims only moments before her death at the pub that doesn’t exist. Indeed, this case is littered with clues that defy everything the veteran detectives know about the habits of serial killers, the methodology of crime, and the odds of making an arrest. Now, with the public on the verge of panic and their superiors determined to shut the PCU down for good, Detectives Bryant and May must rise to the occasion in defense of two great English traditions—the pub and the Peculiar Crimes Unit.

That’s easier said than done. A lost funeral urn, the eighteenth-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, the Knights Templars, the secret history of pubs, and the discovery of an astounding religious relic may be enough to convince one of the pair to take back his resignation letter. But with Bryant consulting a memory specialist and May encountering a brush with mortality, do the Peculiar Crimes Unit’s two living legends have enough life left to stop a murderous conspiracy…and a deadly cupid targeting one of their own.

My Personal Review:
The Peculiar Crimes Unit (PCU) mystery series by Christopher Fowler is one of a kind. Unapologetically British, one finds elements of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, James Bond, The Avengers and Danger Mouse circulating throughout the books, yet the concept is delightfully unique. The
PCU is a division of the London Metropolitan Police Department, which has been in existence for over 60 years. Arthur Bryant and John May, its stalwart, eccentric detectives, have been at the de facto helm for more or less the entire time, riding herd over a group of square but interesting pegs who can’t fit in anywhere else.

In THE VICTORIA VANISHES, middle-aged women are turning up dead in London pubs. The manner of their deaths --- the administration of a painless, extremely quick-acting poison --- is puzzling as well. What is confounding is that Bryant appears to have been the last person to see one of the victims alive, outside of a pub that had been demolished some 80 years previously. He is at a loss. Already coming to doubt the veracity of his observational faculties, he is seriously contemplating retirement. As with so many of their other investigations, the sheer volume of Bryant and May’s case history, and Bryant’s encyclopedic if arcane body of knowledge --- hampered only by his sporadic though temporary memory lapses --- ultimately win the day.

There is a bit of logic to this, given that, in their world, Bryant and May have been investigating cases for over six decades in one location. Elements of past and present cases dovetail, cross over, dip and swirl, and fall back on themselves. But in this book, when the identity of the murderer is revealed and the cad is apprehended, Bryant is not done. There are some unanswered questions that deal not so much with the murderer’s motivation --- that is all too clear --- but with what, or who, wound him up and pointed him toward these particular victims. And what about that vanishing pub?

THE VICTORIA VANISHES is one of those rare books in which the real excitement begins after the murderer is brought to justice. And talk about multiple endings! Fans of the series will be screaming, jumping up and down, unable to believe what they are reading by the time they reach the conclusion. I had to read the ending a couple of times before it sunk in that Fowler indeed was actually carrying out an act that had been hinted at since the beginning of the series. Or is he? That is but one of the many attractions of these novels, which are as delightfully and insidiously addicting as a serotonin supplement.

Fowler makes demands on the reader: the plots are complex, the characters are multi-faceted, and the humor is fast, furious and subtle. This is not a work to be skimmed on the bus, but rather to be read in the quiet of solitude so that every word, sentence and nuance can be fully appreciated alone and within context.

--- Reviewed by Joe Hartlaub

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