Well-Schooled in Murder by Elizabeth George

The Original Theme

When thirteen-year-old Matthew Whately goes missing from Bredgar Chambers, a prestigious public school in the heart of West Sussex, aristocratic Inspector Thomas Lynley receives a call for help from the lads housemaster, who also happens to be an old school chum. Thus, the inspector, his partner, Detective Sergeant Barbara Havers, and forensic scientist Simon Allcourt-St. James find themselves once again outside their jurisdiction and deeply involved in the search for a child—and then, tragically, for a child killer. Questioning prefects, teachers, and pupils closest to the dead boy, Lynley and Havers sense that something extraordinarily evil is going on behind Bredgar Chambers's cloistered walls. But as they begin to unlock the secrets of this closed society, the investigation into Matthew's death leads them perilously close to their own emotional wounds—and blinds them to the signs of another murder in the making....

From the Paperback edition.

My Personal Review:
Well-Schooled in Murder is a fascinating and critical look at social class, the traditions of English public schools and the problems with having a stiff upper lip. What is more remarkable is that those themes are developed in the context of an unusually complex and rewarding murder mystery. This book barely misses becoming a classic in detective fiction and will greatly reward fans of Elizabeth George's series about Thomas Lynley and Barbara Havers and those who do not know the novels.
This is the third book in the series. You can read this book as a stand-alone, but it will work better for you if you first read A Great Deliverance and Payment in Blood.

As the story opens, Lynley is still reeling from having destroyed his relationship with Lady Helen. She's gone off to Greece and sends him occasional noncommittal postcards. Lynley is burying himself in his work. That's making life hard on Barbara Havers whose parents are not doing well.

John Corntel, an old school chum from Eton, approaches Lynley for unofficial assistance in locating a missing student who was under the chums care. The situation soon changes when the student is found in an unlikely place dead, nude and having been tortured. Lynley takes on the case to avoid having free time to mourn his lost love. A delayed autopsy means that Lynley has to develop a sense of means, motive and opportunity without knowing the facts. The various suspects and witnesses do their best to mislead him, adhering to a code of silence that protects their most delicate secrets as well.

As the case evolves, its not a pretty picture that is revealed behind the privileged walls of Bredgar Chambers.

There's little to complain about with this book and much to praise. There's a powerful subplot about the marriage of Simon Allcourt-St. James that nicely develops Simon and his wife as characters. You also get a deep look into several other marriages and relationships. Elizabeth George seems to be saying that as much as we crave intimacy with others; such intimacy will probably bring us more pain than pleasure or happiness. That's a pretty downbeat message, and one that keeps the book from working quite as well as it could. The lesson is that we have to perfect ourselves with another perfected person who shares a mutual attraction before we can achieve happy intimacy. Even then, if we are not candid with one another . . . all bets are off!

Ms. George is equally suspicious of physical attraction. It only seems to lead to no good in this book.

For fans of taut, challenging plotting, this book has few peers. It's as though Ms. George wanted to move away from writing novels that contain mysteries into writing mysteries that reveal the darkest secrets of the human condition. I defy any normal reader to sense the outcome of this book in all of its dimensions until right before the end.

This book will haunt you the most if you read it on a dark and stormy night when unhappiness is poisoning your sleep.

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