

TEACHER NOTES
The Case of the Diamond Shadow
Written by Sophie Masson
Published by ABC Books

SYNOPSIS (PLOT)

Teenagers, Daisy Miller and George Dale, have been close friends for years. Daisy is a great film fan and George loves reading detective stories. When Daisy successfully answers an advertisement for a position as a typist with an interest in films and travel, George is a little more than jealous. Daisy's mysterious new employer is Mrs Peabody, a bumptious, rich jeweller's widow. When George visits his sister and her policeman husband, he learns of a daring diamond theft – and eventually meets his hero, private detective Philip Woodley-Foxe, who takes him on as an apprentice.

The two young friends are soon embroiled in a complex plot involving a famous film star, Olivia Marlowe, dripping with diamonds, and trailing a doomed love affair with a member of European royalty; a daring jewel thief who calls himself The Shadow; and Victor St-Remy, a glamorous young Frenchman with his equally classy grandmother; and a cast of fascinating characters from all parts of Europe. Diamonds go missing, mysterious things happen, people are not who they seem – and there are red herrings galore in this page-turning tale of intrigue and double-crossing.

THEMES

The Case of the Diamond Shadow has everything from celebrity to royalty, drama, comedy, romance and, of course, mystery. In the best tradition of whodunits, this is set in 1930s Europe, the heyday of the private investigator. It is a charming mix of daring intrigue and nostalgia for a more simple, glamorous era – the golden age of detective fiction. This well-paced, easy-to-read adventure is an exciting mixture of fun and danger, humour and glamour, a touch of romance, and lashings of mystery. Also included are comic strips of the adventures of The Shadow and his nemesis Inspecteur Nocturne of the Paris Police. These reveal many of the clues in the book and are based on comics of the 1930s.

WRITING STYLE

The author has deliberately set out to evoke the detective yarns of the 1930s, which will have great appeal for young readers even if they know nothing of the era or early detective novels. The traditional elements of such stories include: a crime that appears impossible to solve; one or more wrongly accused suspects; the search for evidence in the wrong place; apparent scientific analysis of evidence; carefully constructed, complex plots; and detailed backgrounds that reveal interesting aspects of contemporary life. Most important of all are several red herrings – clues that seem to lead to an obvious conclusion that turns out to be far from the right one.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Sophie says: 'This is inspired by four main sources – my French grandfather's fabulous, glamorous photographs of life at the time (he was not only a wealthy playboy but also a professional photographer and film cameraman); the crisp, sparkling, witty and suspenseful detective novels of Agatha Christie, especially those

from the 1920s and 30s; true-crime detective magazines of the 30s; and the racy true-crime books of a real-life celebrity detective of the time, Harry Ashton-Wolfe. I discovered these forgotten gems through the internet one day, when I was looking up stuff about Sherlock Holmes (Ashton-Wolfe knew Arthur Conan Doyle, the writer of the Sherlock Holmes stories).

‘Hilariously boastful and melodramatic but always entertaining, Ashton-Wolfe’s books featured him at the centre of a huge number of blood-curdling cases. They’re also real name-droppers. Ashton-Wolfe claimed to have known master detectives ranging from the top guys at the French Surete (French detectives were held up then as the model of scientific detection) and Scotland Yard, as well as Conan Doyle. Then there are well-known criminals, ranging from violent anarchists to the cunning Eurasian criminal, Hanoi Shan, who became the model for the famous film villain Fu Manchu.

‘The 30s was the perfect setting for it. And it was just so much fun to write. The comic strips of the adventures of Inspecteur Nocturne, which provide some of the clues, are based on comics of the 1930s, were written by me but illustrated by my teenage son Bevis.’

EDITORIAL COMMENT

This first book in what is hoped to be an ongoing series, is a great introduction to this genre from well-known writer for young readers, Sophie Masson. Her ripping and gripping yarn features two appealing teenage protagonists, Daisy Bell and George Dale. Both of them become apprentice sleuths – and the way is left open for future books telling of their adventures. Crime stories have always been a popular form of entertainment – in print, radio, film and television. Not only is this a page-turner, but it also introduces readers to the glamour, mystery and romance of a nostalgic era.

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

Advance copies are being sent to relevant journals and magazines and there will be promotional giveaways. The author is widely published as a reviewer for many newspapers and literary journals and is available for appearances at bookshops, conferences, festivals as well as in-school talks.

An advance information sheet is attached to these notes.

STUDY NOTES

This book can be used as the basis of the study of crime fiction and the many ways it can be presented.

- What are the essential elements of a traditional crime story?
- How important is the setting to increase the mystery and suspense of the story?
- What part do exotic and out-of-the-ordinary characters play in creating atmosphere and suspense?
- How does crime fiction differ from true crime stories?

What aspects of the socio-economic reality of Europe in the 1930s are used in this story to take readers into a world that is different to their own?

How realistic do you think these elements are?
How different would this story be if it were set in the present time?

Plot

- Analyse the storyline of *The Case of the Diamond Shadow*.
- What are the red herrings that the author introduces?
- How effective do you think they are?
- Are there other possible outcomes?
- What constitutes a simple plot line for a whodunit?
- Based on this, devise your own whodunit with as many red herrings and layers of complexity as you like.

Crime magazines and comic strips.

- What is their origin – what are the earliest examples – and why do you think they are so popular?
- How effective is the use of the comic strip to tell the story and reveal clues?
- Get students to devise their own storyline and comic strip, either individually or in groups. For a variation, get one group to do the graphics and another to add the storyline.
- Why do you think that the 1930s are regarded as the golden age for crime fiction?
- How did these magazines and comics change over the decades?
- What are the popular forms of crime fiction today?

For more information on Sophie Masson got to
<http://users.nsw.chariot.net.au/~smasson/>