

Discussion Questions

The Inspector Lynley Mysteries

1. Inspector Lynley is known to frequently defy his superiors in order to pursue an investigation according to his own rules. In *Limbo*, he conducts searches without warrants and even withholds forensic evidence in order to avoid his own arrest as a murder suspect. Do you think Lynley is always justified when he avoids protocol or defies his superior officers? Are his actions governed by ego or by more altruistic motives? In general, do you think that officers or inspectors should operate “above the law”?
2. How do Lynley and Havers use psychological principles to guide their investigations? For example, in the *Limbo* episode, Lynley rules out suicide as the cause of Julia’s death based on his assessment of her state of mind. In the *Know Thine Enemy* episode, Havers draws conclusions about Tanya’s character due to her condition as a battered woman. Does this psychological mode of analysis always direct Lynley and Havers to the right conclusions, or does it sometimes backfire?
3. Lynley accuses Havers of being “sexist” in the *Know Thine Enemy* episode because of her sympathy for Tanya. Is he right? How do Havers’s “sexist” tendencies serve her? How do they lead her astray? Alternatively, how does Lynley’s male bias get in the way of his investigation at times?
4. Who is the real hero or heroine of the *Know Thine Enemy* episode? How does this episode reinforce that the dynamic between Lynley and Havers is what helps them succeed in solving crimes? How would their success be compromised or diminished if they were to work alone?
5. As *Limbo* opens we see a grieving Thomas Lynley, still on leave from work six months after the death of his beloved wife Helen. After she was brutally murdered in Elizabeth George’s 2005 novel *With No One as Witness*, readers who had avidly followed the romance of Thomas Lynley and Helen Clyde through the previous novels were stunned, so much so that Ms. George posted a special “message from the author” about her decision on her Web site at www.elizabethgeorgeonline.com. If you are a longtime Lynley fan, what was your reaction to this plot twist? How well do you think *Limbo*, which was not written by Elizabeth George nor taken from any of her novels, presented Lynley’s emotional state six months later? For those new to the series, what is your reaction to Ms. George’s explanation, excerpted in part below? How does the most recent installment of the Lynley mysteries, *Careless in Red*, show the characters’ reaction to the “hand grenade thrown into their midst”?

To understand [my] decision, the first thing you need to consider is the two alternatives available to a writer when she decides to create a series that features continuing characters. A series like this can be approached by freezing the characters in time, place, and circumstance. Or it can be approached by allowing the characters to grow, change, develop, and move through time...When a writer is doing a crime series and the continuing characters are frozen in time, place, and circumstance...the reading experience is all about correctly deciding “whodunit” before the writer reveals the answer. Taking up this kind of novel, the reader isn’t asked to engage deeply with the characters but rather to be a participant in a mental game with the author....

For perhaps the six years preceding the creation of With No One as Witness, I knew that Helen Clyde—as I’ve always referred to her—was going to die...I knew it was unlikely to be a popular move, but I also knew it was artistically appropriate...Why? The answer is simple. Helen’s death, unlike the death of any other character, had the potential to affect more greatly the characters left alive. Her death was like a hand grenade thrown into their midst: The aftermath allowed me myriad story lines to pick up on, based upon the devastating impact of this crime on the other characters. No other death would have done that for me. As I looked at it, no other death would have come close.

6. Elizabeth George originally invented Havers as a foil for Lynley, saying in an interview, “When I looked at Lynley, I realized I had created a character who was fairly outrageous on the believability scale. There is only one earl that I know of on the police force in all of Great Britain. So I created a character to dislike him before he came on the scene.” Do you think the addition of Havers allows the reader to have more sympathy for Lynley? Which of the two do you prefer? George has also said she will never allow Lynley and Havers to have a romantic relationship with each other. Why do you think she feels this way? Do you agree? What unwritten rules of the genre would it violate if she did permit such a relationship?
7. Elizabeth George writes classic English murder mysteries, but she herself is American. Can you tell? How does she portray Americans in her novels? How is Inspector Lynley firmly ensconced in the tradition of the “gentleman detective” that began with English sleuths like Sherlock Holmes and Lord Peter Wimsey? (See [A Brief History of the Detective Story](#)) Which detectives in current fiction and on television also exist in this tradition, and which function more in the hardboiled American tradition? Are there any you can think of that defy both traditions? Who are your favorite fictional detectives?

The Mystery Genre

1. Why are we so fascinated with crime, especially murder? What real-life crimes, historical or contemporary, have intrigued you? What parallels do you see between any of the Lynley films and true stories “ripped from the headlines”? When *Limbo* was scheduled to be shown for the first time in England in the summer of 2007, the Madeleine McCann case was still dominating the news; the BBC delayed the premiere of *Limbo*, explaining that “due to similarities between the billed episode and further developments in the Madeleine McCann case reported in the news that day, the decision was taken to replace the planned episode with a repeat from last year.” What do you think of that decision?
2. Mystery and detective fiction is often judged by how well it conforms to the conventions of its genre—that is, how well it follows the unwritten “rules” of the way detectives, criminals, suspects, and clues are presented. In the 1920s, writer Ronald Knox made a list of “commandments” that he believed must be followed in all good detective fiction. Since then, nearly all have been broken, but they are still a guide for most writers of the classic English school. Without looking at Knox’s rules, but simply from your experience with the genre, what do you think are the top five or six “commandments” that all classic detective fiction follows or should follow? Compare them to the list below. How is the classic detective novel being reinvented to remain fresh today? How is technology changing the “rules”?

Knox’s Mystery Rules

- The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
- All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- Nor more than one secret room or passage is allowed.
- The detective himself must not commit the crime.
- The detective is bound to declare any clues upon which he may happen to light.
- The friend of the detective, the “Watson”, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.

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