

"They're going to do just fine."

An interview with Elizabeth George author of

THE SUMMER OF
MYSTERY!
BRAND NEW SEASON

THE INSPECTOR LYNLEY MYSTERIES

Sundays, September 5 through 26, 2004 at 9pm on PBS.

In 1988, English teacher Elizabeth George of El Toro High School in El Toro, California, hit the big time with her first published novel, *A Great Deliverance*. That book introduced readers to an unforgettable detective duo: aristocratic Scotland Yard Inspector Thomas Lynley and his working class assistant, Sergeant Barbara Havers. Lynley and Havers have since won millions of committed fans in eleven enthralling novels, each beautifully written and intriguingly plotted.

Now, the bestselling book series has become a critically acclaimed MYSTERY! series, with four new *Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, airing Sundays, September 5 through 26, 2004 at 9pm on PBS.

Before the very first broadcast of *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* in 2002, Elizabeth George talked to MYSTERY! by phone from her home in Huntington Beach, just a few miles from her old haunt at El Toro High. She was just putting the finishing touches on the latest Lynley-Havers novel.

Q: What was it like to see your first novel, *A Great Deliverance*, turned into a film?

E.G.: It was an unusual experience. The people, the places, and the events that I'm writing about are very vivid to me. So my picture of the events that I hold in my mind is naturally not going to be the same as anybody else's, whether that person is a reader or a filmmaker. Having said that, there were things about the film that I felt they got exactly right; not that there is a right and wrong way to do it, but just that they really matched my vision of it. For example, the farm at which the incident takes place and the barn where the body is found were exactly as I had imagined them. Those kinds of things were very gratifying to see. Otherwise, it's a little bit like an out-of-body experience.

Q: How did you feel about the choice of actors for Lynley and Havers?

E.G.: I knew who they were in advance. I had seen Nathaniel Parker in *Into Thin Air*, when it was on network television. And I had seen Sharon Small, who plays Sergeant Havers, in a British television show called *Glasgow Kiss* when I was in England. My memory of Nathaniel



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made me feel that he would do fine as Lynley. He isn't visually anything like Lynley, but I would prefer to have somebody who could play the character, rather than look like the character and not be able to carry him off. Nor did they suggest doing something like dying Nathaniel's hair, which I would have opposed because I don't think it ever looked quite good on Edward Petherbridge, when they dyed his hair to play Peter Wimsey. You don't want the audience looking at somebody's hair and thinking, gee, couldn't they have done a better job with that dye? So I was pretty confident about Nathaniel. But I was concerned about Sharon, because she is so pretty. Sergeant Havers, my character, is not; she's dumpy and unattractive. The producers had told me that they had had a number of actresses come in and read for the part, and Sharon had come back several times. Every time she just blew them away, she was so wonderful. When I went to see the filming of *A Great Deliverance* [the first film in the series], I happened to go the day of Sharon's big scene where she is talking to Lynley at the end of the case. As soon as I saw her, I knew that she was going to be fine.

Q: In your books the characters themselves evolve. Will we see the same thing on the screen?

E.G.: I think you will, definitely.

Q: I've read that John Thaw's portrayal of Inspector Morse on MYSTERY! influenced the way Colin Dexter wrote about the character in the Morse novels. Do you see that possibility in your own case?

E.G.: No, I really don't. I have a very strong image of those two characters, Lynley and Havers. If I began to feel that Nathaniel and Sharon were starting to intrude upon my creative process, then I would probably just stop watching the films. There's a very mysterious thing that occurs when I am writing one of these novels, which is that I feel the characters very intensely.

Q: Your characters are so vivid. Do you ever dream about them as if they were real people?

E.G.: No, they don't come alive to that extent. I've never had a dream about them, but when I'm in the process of working with them in a novel, they are very real to me.

Q: Are your fans concerned that their favorite parts will be left out of these MYSTERY! films?

E.G.: Actually, no. I'm not hearing concern about that. I am hearing grave concern about the casting of Nathaniel and Sharon, because they don't look like Lynley and Havers. But I think that people will be won over by them. My mother, who is now deceased, had always been thoroughly convinced that the only person who could play Lynley was Anthony Andrews [recently in *Love in a Cold Climate* on EXXONMOBIL MASTERPIECE THEATRE]. When she was watching the film of *A Great Deliverance*, she leaned over about twenty minutes into it and said, I think he's going to do just fine. If people can

let go of their mental image of the character, then they will have that same feeling. They're going to do just fine.

Q: How do you decide what setting you're going to use for a novel?

E.G.: It's generally a setting that resonates with me on a soul level. It's hard to explain. I know it when I see it. It would be a place that's topographically interesting, that has the potential for historical allusions, that is architecturally interesting, and that basically resonates with me. It's an odd thing.

Q: Do you have the crime and characters in mind before you choose the setting?

E.G.: In [*A Great Deliverance*] I did. I knew what the crime was. I knew who the characters were. I just needed the setting for it. But sometimes it's the opposite. Sometimes I really want to set a book in a place. For example, with *For the Sake of Elena* I knew I wanted to set a book in Cambridge, so I started out by going there and looking for a place where I could put a body. And then I worked back from there.

Q: *A Great Deliverance* is the first novel in which you team up Lynley and Havers. When you were writing it, were you thinking, this is really clicking?

E.G.: As I was writing that book, which was my third attempt at an English crime novel, I knew I finally had it. Yeah. I thought, boy, this is it. This does what I want it to do, and this is going to get published. I was pretty confident of that book. But you know, it was my third attempt, and the other ones were complete novels, too.

Q: Could you talk about the different psychologies of Lynley and Havers?

E.G.: As I see the characters, Lynley is a man who was born into privileged circumstances. And he is a man who recognizes that it is purely a quirk of fate that has allowed him to be brought up in these circumstances. His father died when he was twenty-two. The manner in which he dealt with that has created a tremendous reservoir of guilt, and it estranged him from his mother for something like sixteen years. In that estrangement, he ended up deserting a younger brother who is ten years his junior and who has a lot of difficulty with drug abuse. That great reservoir of guilt is what underlies a lot of what Lynley does. He operates from a tremendous sense of having failed people in his past. In contrast, you have Sergeant Havers, who is acutely aware that she is from an underprivileged background and has had to fight her way through. What dominates her behavior is a tremendous need to prove herself the equal of anyone—because of her accent, because of her education, because of her economic status, not to mention her social status. She knows her brain is the equal of anybody else's. That's where she's coming from.

Q: I would guess that she appeals to a lot of your readers.

E.G.: Especially in America. As Americans, we always root for the underdog.

Q: Your books have a lovely way of using literary references, often Shakespeare, but there's a place where you compare St. James to the lame Greek god Hephaestus. Is this the former English teacher in you coming through, trying to gently educate your readers?

E.G.: It's not a conscious thing. It always delights me to find an allusion that is apt, be it literary, or historical, or artistic. It's not my intention to try to educate anybody as much as it is to enrich my own experience as a writer.

Q: What authors have influenced you?

E.G.: The one author who has influenced my writing the most is the English writer John Fowles, who wrote *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *The Magus*, *The Collector*, and other novels. None of his books is like any other. He continually challenges himself artistically. Some things work; some things don't work. I have tremendous respect for that. Here is a man who is not writing the same novel over and over again.

Q: Your novels also try different approaches.

E.G.: I try to create a challenge for myself in each book. And sometimes, believe me, I just kick myself afterwards, and say, why on earth did you ever attempt this, you idiot! But I'm always better for the experience. The challenge might be writing about the Pakistani experience in Great Britain. Here I am, an American, I'm going to jump into the mind of a Pakistani woman and talk about how it is to be not only Pakistani, but Pakistani in England. That's a huge challenge. Or it might be a structural challenge. *A Traitor to Memory* was two novels woven into one. One of them was a first person narrative told by a man. I wanted to see if I could get myself into the voice of a man and maintain that voice throughout that portion of the book.

Q: I've read that you watch British television to stay current on British culture. Does this include any PBS shows?

E.G.: Oh yes, for years, I never missed either MASTERPIECE THEATRE or MYSTERY! I remember when MYSTERY! did *Game, Set, and Match*. Along about week eleven, my husband and I said to each other, what the hell are we going to do when this ends? It was so wonderful. Oh God, there have been some great shows. *Die Kinder*, I loved that one. *Prime Suspect*. Oh!

Q: Considering the amount of detail that goes into your novels, how do you do them so quickly?

E.G.: One thing that helps is that I've always been an organizational freak. When I start a book, I write a minimum of five pages every day, except weekends. If I'm going on a ski trip, I take my computer with me, get up at six, do my five pages, and then go

skiing. What that does is allow me to stay present in the story, which makes the writing much easier because I don't have to go back and re-familiarize myself with the intricacies of the plot. Another reason is that I am blessed with an assistant who takes the burden of life off my shoulders. She cooks the meals; she does my shopping; she walks my dog. That liberates my time. And then my husband is very supportive. When we travel, he is in complete agreement that I'm going to get up at six, and I'm going to be working on my book. And he doesn't have any problem with that, because when I'm done—and I'm usually done by ten—we have the rest of the day.

Q: You always have intriguing epigraphs that almost act as clues to the mystery. My impression is that you take great care in selecting them.

E.G.: Yes. The epigraph will do one of two things. It will either give a clue, or it will explain the theme. As a matter of fact, in one of my books the epigraph actually tells who the killer is. But I won't tell you which book.

Q: It's often said that the best way to learn a craft is to teach it. Has your experience teaching creative writing helped in your own evolution as a writer?

E.G.: Definitely. Art can't be taught; passion can't be taught; discipline can't be taught; but craft can be taught. And writing is both an art and a craft. So when I'm working with my students in their own writing, I can't be quibbling with them over some aspect of their craft if it's something that I myself am not doing in my own writing. That's one thing that teaching does for me. A second thing is that it keeps to the forefront of my mind all those things that go into every artist's toolbox. It puts me in a position of being better able to step back from my own writing, analyze it, and figure out what's wrong with it.

Q: When you're in the middle of a book, do you ever find yourself surprised at the direction a particular character is taking?

E.G.: No. Only once did that happen. It was in *Deception on His Mind*. I got about 900 pages into the manuscript and discovered that the person I thought had committed the crime had not committed the crime. It was a different character. I was initially going to ignore that, but I could see that it was much stronger to go with this other character as the killer. So I thought, OK, I'm going to bite the bullet and rewrite these 900 pages. But when I went back and re-read those 900 pages, I discovered that all I needed to do was change two sentences, because that character had always been the killer! I just hadn't seen it. That was the only time that happened. Other times, in an individual scene, a character might do something that I didn't expect them to do. But because I create my characters all in advance, a character has never done something that is out of character.

Q: Do you ever get deep into plot and think, oh my goodness, this is not going to work?

E.G.: Oh yeah. That happened in a subplot when I was writing *In Pursuit of the Proper Sinner*. Every time I came to that point in the subplot it was like trying to dance through cold porridge. It was a nightmare. I finally thought, this isn't working. Why isn't it working? So I pulled out the character analysis and read the analysis of the character involved in the subplot and discovered that I had gone off on a wild hare. This character would never have done the things that I was saying he did. No wonder it didn't work! So then I had to redo that whole part of the book.

Q: When you were a high school teacher, did you ever dream you'd be a famous author?

E.G.: While I was teaching, I always knew I was really supposed to be writing. I enjoyed my time at El Toro High School, but I had this sensation deep in the pit of my stomach that I was supposed to be writing. And so in 1983, when my husband at the time was writing his dissertation, he bought a computer. That put this piece of state-of-the-art equipment in the house. So it was put-up or shut-up time for me. I decided to put-up and see if I could do it. My hope was to be successful enough to equal my salary as a high school teacher, so that I could write full time. As far as the books being as successful as they have become, that's been a surprise to me.

The Inspector Lynley Mysteries, Series III, is a co-production of BBC Worldwide and WGBH Boston. The producer is Ruth Baumgarten; directors are Richard Spence (*Playing for the Ashes*), Brian Stirner (*In the Presence of the Enemy*), Edward Bennett (*A Suitable Vengeance*), and Tim Leandro (*Deception on His Mind*). Executive producers are Sally Haynes for the BBC and Rebecca Eaton for WGBH Boston.

Writers for the series are Kate Wood (*Playing for the Ashes*), Francesca Brill (*In the Presence of the Enemy*), and Val Windsor (*A Suitable Vengeance*, *Deception on His Mind*). The series is based on the novels by Elizabeth George.

MYSTERY! is presented on PBS by WGBH Boston, where Rebecca Eaton is executive producer.

MYSTERY! is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and described for people who are blind or visually impaired by the Media Access Group at WGBH. The descriptive narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs. For more information about MYSTERY!, visit the series Web site at pbs.org/mystery.

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Additional press information

Press materials and photography for MYSTERY! are available through the PBS (pbs.org/pressroom) and the WGBH (pressroom.wgbh.org) press rooms.

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