Sleight-of-Hand:
John Dickson Carr Was the Man Who Explained Miracles
by John C. Tibbetts

Consider the bizarre circumstances of the case: The victim is found, beheaded, in a guarded chamber. Witnesses swear he had been alone in the room. In another, equally baffling case, a man is struck down by a bow and arrow from inside an empty, locked room. And how about the man who is strangled in the middle of a clay-based tennis court that is unmarked by footprints? Or the woman who disappears from a moving carriage that has been under constant observation? These classic mystery novels—respectively, It Walks by Night (1930), The Judas Window (1938), The Problem of the Wire Cage (1939), and Papa La-Bas (1968)—span the almost fifty-year writing career of John Dickson Carr, dubbed by Robert Adey in his definitive study of the genre, Locked Room Murders (1991), “the foremost exponent of the impossible-crime novel.”

Despite the exotic nature of such books, few mystery writers have been as scrupulously fair with the reader as Carr. He could be counted upon to supply all the clues needed for the solution of the crime. Yet, when it came to the mysteries of his own life, he did not play fair. He had a devilish surprise in store for any erstwhile biographer who followed him—

“He never kept papers!” wails Douglas G. Greene, author of the recent John Dickson Carr: The Man Who Explained Miracles (Otto Penzler Press, 1994) and a Professor of History and Humanities at Old Dominion University. “There are no surviving manuscripts, notes, or typescripts. He threw things out. There is no repository of Carr materials, no archives. He never took notes. He never outlined a book. He worked it out all in his head, chapter by chapter. He knew perfectly well from his work on a biography of Arthur Conan Doyle how important it was to keep papers, but he never kept any of his own!”

Undaunted by the scarcity of ready materials, Green the biographer has taken a leaf from Carr himself—Greene has turned detective.

In an interview with this writer, Greene admitted he has had to devote years to the puzzle, gathering scattered clues about Carr’s life and work from the correspondence of friends and colleagues like Frederic Dannay (Ellery Queen), Clayton Rawson, and Anthony Boucher; contacting surviving schoolmates; examining papers from his British and American publishers, Hamish Hamilton and Harper & Row; and checking the archives of the BBC, for whom he wrote radio plays during World War II. But the key to the project, says Greene, who never met Carr but enjoyed correspondence with him in the years before his death in 1977, was the cooperation of the Carr family—wife Clarice (now deceased) and daughters Mary, Julia, and Bonnie. “He was a private person in some ways and didn’t reveal much about himself. Clarice had indicated to me at one time that she didn’t think a biography ought to be done. Carr had many things about him that some might have wanted to be kept secret. He drank very heavily (his father had drunk heavily, too), and he had an addictive personality. There were also extra-marital affairs. Clarice
was long suffering. But as the years went by, she changed her mind. She trusted me and was willing to talk to me in more detail than to most people. I don’t think an author ever has had more cooperation from a family. When you’re an authorized biographer, you have to take the family into account; and I tried to do that. However, you also have to be honest.”

The results are magnificent. Carr aficionados (and I must admit I am one) have been waiting for Greene’s biography for many years, ever since word got around more than a decade ago that it was in preparation. Up to now, in addition to the tantalizing editorial comments found in Greene’s four volumes of collected stories by Carr—The Doorway to Doom (1980), The Dead Sleep Lightly (1985), Fell and Foul Play (1991) and Merrivale, March and Murder (1991) we have had only one book-length study on Carr, S. T. Joshi’s commendable John Dickson Carr: A Critical Study (The Popular Press, 1990), to tide us over. But now here is this big new volume from Otto Penzler Press, and it’s the best news we mystery hounds have had in many a day.

Carr was born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, in 1906, the son of Julia and Wooda Nicholas Carr. His eclectic tastes in history and literature came from happy boyhood hours spent in his father’s vast library. He wrote his first detective stories at Hill preparatory school and later at Haverford College.

After the success of his first novel, It Walks by Night (1930), which introduced the saturnine sleuth, Henri Bencolin, a French Police magistrate, Carr married Clarice Cleaves, an English woman he had met while on vacation. “They met on shipboard. He was returning to America via London, and it was love at first sight. He looked upon her at first as kind of ‘eternal flapper,’ and he was this worldly, sophisticated young man. It was only later, after John’s drinking and trouble with finances that Clarice turned out to be the strong one, who helped him in his work.”

They moved to England in 1933 and for the next decade he wrote at an incredible pace, producing thirty-seven novels, a short-story collection (The Department of Queer Complaints, 1940), and a nonfiction study (The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey, 1937) that Greene considers one of his finest works. Dr. Gideon Fell, his most popular detective, an historian and occasional consultant to Scotland Yard, first appeared in Hag’s Nook (1933). Two other detectives appeared, under Carr’s pen name of “Carter Dickson”—the redoubtable Sir Henry Merrivale, a barrister, who debuted in The Plague Court Murders (1934); and Colonel March, chief of the “Department of Queer Complaints.”

In 1936 Carr became the first American to be elected to the legendary Detection Club in London, joining notables like Dorothy Sayers, Anthony Berkeley, E.C. Bentley, and G.K. Chesterton. The latter figure, the creator of the immortal detective, Father Brown, was Carr’s idol and model. His vast bulk, mop of hair, love of theatrical apparel—including shovel-hats and capes—and preoccupation with paradox were the model for Gideon Fell. “Carr never met Chesterton, unfortunately,” says Greene. “He did tell him in a letter that he was basing Fell on him. And when Carr became a member of the Detection Club he was excited at the prospect of meeting his hero. But Chesterton died before the induction. Carr loved color, paradoxes, and
shapes the way Chesterton did. Chesterton never relied on clues and investigative procedures the way other writers did. He created a shape, a pattern, which usually misidentified or saw from the wrong angle. As soon as you saw the correct shape, that explained everything. And he does play fair with the reader in that Father Brown never has evidence that the reader doesn’t have. Ultimately, of course, Carr and Chesterton were very different personalities. Chesterton was very religious, metaphysical, and Carr was not. Chesterton was basically liberal in his politics, and Carr was basically a conservative.”

During World War II Carr shuttled back and forth between America and England, writing material for the BBC and CBS, including propaganda programs, original plays, and adaptations of literary works. Greene for the first time presents a thoroughly detailed examination of these relatively unknown broadcasts. He argues that the thirty-minute broadcasts for *Suspense and Appointment with Fear*—six of which are collected in *The Door to Doom* (1980) and nine more in *The Dead Sleep Lightly*—are “the finest products of the golden age of radio mysteries.”

After the war Carr spent two years researching his Life of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, a work that greatly influenced the last two decades of his career. With Doyle’s historical novels as a model, Carr turned to historical fiction of his own, writing fifteen such novels in all, beginning with *The Bride of Newgate* (1950) and continuing with *The Devil in Velvet* (1951), *Fire, Burn* (1956) and his last novel, *The Hungry Goblin* (1972). They are set in, respectively, the Napoleonic era, Restoration England, and (with the latter two titles) late Victorian London. It was a rich vein of material, and he particularly loved the lore of highwaymen, plunderers, hangmen, and magicians—”swashbuckling stuff, not altogether free of gadzookses or the like, but at least historically accurate,” he has an autobiographical character say in *Deadly Hall* (1971). Elsewhere, in an essay entitled “Stand and Deliver” Carr admitted in his own voice, “Here is dirty work in plenty.” Yet, behind his sardonic tone Carr was a serious amateur historian. “To write good history is the noblest work of man,” he wrote. Each of these books is followed by a section entitled “Notes for the Curious,” which outline in detail the primary source materials he drew upon. Moreover, as Greene claims, they were as fairly clued and ingenious as his earliest stories. “In Carr’s world locked rooms and other ‘miracle problems’ are as likely to occur two or three centuries ago as they are now, and swordsmen of the past have the ability of Fell, Merrivale, and Bencolin to discern the pattern in an apparently unrelated series of events.”

Settling permanently in Greenville, South Carolina in 1965, Carr never stopped writing. By now he was a past president of the Mystery Writers of America, a Grand Master, and acknowledged the world over as the best in his field. Even in his last years, plagued by ill health, he contributed a book review column to Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine.

Carr’s mastery of the locked-room mystery stands at the core of his achievement, culminating a grand literary tradition that had begun in the late 18th century with stories by Ann Radcliffe (The Mysteries of Udolpho, 1794) and Charles Brockden Brown (Wieland, 1798). Here were locked rooms, spectral apparitions,
invisible voices, and vanishing corpses aplenty. Supernatural agencies seemed to be at work, but it was revealed that mere mortals, with the aid of trap doors, sliding panels, secret passages, and ventriloquism, had perpetrated the dastardly deeds. If the reader, quite rightly, felt cheated at these mundane revelations, it was because, as E.T.A. Hoffmann noted in his novel, *Kater Murr* (1822), the magician/artist risks disappointing his audience when he explains his illusions: "A terrible fright pleases a man more than the natural explanation of what seems to be ghostlike."

Ghosts and witches are not to be so easily banished. The rational solution must match in ingenuity and imagination the seeming impossibility of the mystery at hand. An equilibrium, as it were—a position Hoffmann described as "Besonnenheit" (presence of mind in the face of emotional disorder)—should exist between the howling chaos of the mystery and the ordered logic of the detective. The explanation behind apparent miracles, wrote G.K. Chesterton in 1901 in one of the first of his many articles on detective stories, has to be worthy of those miracles. Returning to the subject in 1925, he continued: "It is useless for a thing to be unexpected if it was not worth expecting. . . . The climax must not be only the bursting of a bubble but rather the breaking of a dawn."

Thus, in that prototype of the modern locked-room mystery, "The Mystery of the Rue Morgue" (1841), Edgar Allan Poe drew the noose tighter around the options open to the inquiring detective, delighting the reader at the end with revelations concerning an escaped orangutan and an unlatched window. The solution of Israel Zangwill's classic *The Big Bow Mystery* (1891), was likewise satisfying. While not breaching the locked room—it remains satisfying involuable—the explanation revolved around some criminous sleight-of-hand and a quirk of human perception. "The eye sees, sometimes, what it wishes to see," declares the detective, Grodman, "but more often what it expects to see." The redoubtable Holmes confronted his share of miracle crimes ("The Speckled Band," "The Thor Bridge," etc.) and stated the challenge this way: "It is impossible, as I state it, and therefore I must, in some respect, have stated it wrong." The battle of wits between reader an author, between criminal and detective, was joined—a battle that John Dickson Carr would call "the grandest game in the world."

There must be rules, of course, as we have seen. In one of the greatest classics of the genre, *The Three Coffins* (1935), John Dickson Carr himself lays down the law regarding locked-room problems. Speaking through the voice of detective Gideon Fell (who for the moment discourses on how to write rather than solve such cases), Carr scornfully dismisses the standard cheap-shot solutions like secret panels and secret passageways. The rooms or chambers or arenas of foul play must indeed be sealed or rendered in some way inviolable. The author (and, by implication, the murderer) must utilize sheer ingenuity to dispatch his victim. Strategies include: (1. an accident or a suicide made to look like murder; (2. the use of a mechanical device already planted in the room; (3. an action of illusion and legerdemain; (4. the machinations of someone outside the room who contrived to make the act appear to have been commited inside the room; etc. (He especially condemns the use of chimneys.)
In nearly fifty years of writing detective novels, historical melodramas, short stories, and radio dramas, Carr remained faithful to his credo, consistently wreaking ingenious variations on these basic tenets, spinning out from his loom a luridly delicious filigree of dizzying complexity. “Ingenuity lifts the thing up,” wrote Carr; “it is triumphant; it blazes, like a diabolical lightning flash....” Sometimes, admittedly, Carr’s ingenuity tests our comprehension. Indeed, Dr. Fell’s unravelling of the byzantine secrets behind the two murders in *The Three Coffins* is so staggeringly complex that it demands several readings to make it all out. Carr defended such extravagances. “Since apparently [the author/criminal] has violated the laws of nature for our entertainment,” Dr. Fell/Carr says, “then heaven knows he is entitled to violate the laws of Probable Behavior!”

Sadly, Greene reveals that Carr’s last years found him bitterly aware that he had fallen out of step with much contemporary crime fiction, especially the hard-boiled school of Hammett and Chandler. “He was unhappy that the old rules of fair play to the reader weren’t followed closely anymore,” says Greene. “And when the Detection Club, which he loved, told him that they had changed the oath about fair play to the reader, it was really rough on him.”

He also felt that the world had lost whatever sense of adventure and romance it had had in his youth. Ever gallant and fastidious, he affected old-world manners and fiercely clung to politically conservative views. His detectives Fell and Bencolin likewise seemed holdovers from an earlier, more chivalrous and mannered age. And his books, particularly *Hag’s Nook*, *The Four False Weapons* and *The Bowstring Murders*, are populated with surrogates for Carr—desk-bound young men who hunger to escape the mundane life for action, color, and thrills. In a dialogue in the latter novel, a young friend asks Professor Tairlaine to talk about his past adventures. “What do you mean by ‘adventures’ anyway?” asks the friend. “Do you mean in the grand manner? A slant-eyed adventuress, sables and all, who suddenly slips into this compartment, whispers, ‘Six of diamonds—north tower at midnight—beware of Orloff!’” “Yes,” says Tairlaine, “I suppose I did mean something like that.”

“Carr saw the world as it should be, as he wanted it to be,” says Greene. “From his earliest high school writing, he yearned for that kind of world. He hated realistic writing. He didn’t think the purpose of literature was to describe things the way they are—he said in college he didn’t want the thump of the janitor’s mop of the ‘hard-boiled stuff.’ That’s one of the reasons he lived in England for so long and, in later days, why he went into historical novels. He just didn’t like the world after the War.

“He consciously felt himself a storyteller in the grand tradition. You get the impression—especially in his early books—of someone standing by a fire drinking a glass of port. Storytime. He sets the stage. He loved to be a ham. Even in private conversation he loved telling wild stories, especially about himself. He claimed to his own wife when they met that he had been born in Paris where his father had been an ambassador. It was only when Clarice met John’s father several years later that she learned it wasn’t true at all! But it was a better story than the truth!”

In *The Man Who Explained Miracles*, Greene approaches his subject with all the unabashed enthusiasm of a fan and all the
John Dixon Carr

scholarly apparatus of the careful historian, agreeably blending both. “I still remember the joy I first had reading him,” he says. “What I liked about Carr then and now is that he did all sorts things I love—the atmosphere, the witches and ghosts, and the sense of history. He was solidly grounded in history, including my own period of specialization, the Restoration. It’s the milieu of one of his greatest books, *The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey* (1937), and it figures prominently in *The Four False Weapons*, where you’ll find a careful reenactment of a notorious card game that once upon a time was played in the court of Louis XIV.”

Readers who think they already know Carr will be delighted to learn about the radio plays and the dozens of uncollected short stories and essays. Even for the connoisseur, Greene has some surprises. There are anecdotes and photographs from Carr’s college days editing *The Haverfordian*, new material on his years with the Detection Club, and findings concerning a number of unfinished writing projects. He sorts through the genealogies of plots and unearths surprising origins for some of the greatest stories, like one of my personal favorites, “The Terror of the Dark Tower.” Of especial interest are revelations about Carr’s detectives, Bencolin, Fell, and Merrivale. It was Bencolin, not Fell, for example, who was first intended to solve the case of *The Three Coffins*. “It was planned to be a Bencolin novel because he usually had the cases with all the supernatural elements. But Carr changed his mind and rewrote it for Fell. It worked very well.”

Finally, it is worth noting that Carr, whose fair play with the reader was unequalled, frequently employed one more bit of sleight-of-hand that has perhaps gone unsuspected. Consider: It is only after reading many of his novels that you begin to realize that he questions in subtle ways the very convention that is central to the classical detective story—that there can be only one possible solution. To be sure, he would have expressed dismay at the notion that a crime could have several solutions—the gimmick of movies like *Clue* and stage presentations like the musical version of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. No matter how tangled the thickets of clues and the motives of the various suspects, every detail of the construction must point irresistibly and irrevocably toward the single solution, like arrows toward their intended target. Anything less is a cheat. “John once said he couldn’t change anything in one of his books without changing everything else,” says Greene. Every part was dependent on the other. He really constructed a ladder of clues, a whole series of things—which meant that only one explanation was possible. When the final revelation occurs, everything has to make sense. All the little gestures, all the clues must tie together. It’s extremely difficult. I don’t think anyone has come close to Carr in the ability to handle such complicated construction.”

And yet... and yet. In book after book Carr takes particular delight in offering not one, not two, but sometimes three and four false solutions before the problem is finally solved (see especially *The Arabian Nights Murder*, 1936 and *The Man Who Could Not Shudder*, 1940). We eagerly seize upon each one, excited that yes, we suspected as much. But then, Carr rudely knocks the props from under us and, yes, we are excited about that, too. Carr knows full well we want—and expect—to be shamelessly bamboozled. By
the time his final answer does appear, we are satisfied, albeit a bit exhausted.

But is it really the end? Ultimately, I wonder if he is consciously aware of the delicious but terrifying possibility that this succession of proposed solutions only reinforces the idea that all approaches to truth, morality, and reason are provisional after all? Can it be that even Fell and Bencolin—those champion exorcists of the genre—can never utterly banish the demons? In The Burning Court, arguably Carr’s greatest achievement, Carr offers for the first and only time an irrational alternative to the rational deduction that has already been proposed and accepted. We must confront both. The gate to Hell has not been completely closed; it swings a bit ajar (read the book and find out why!).

But wait a minute. Darned if Carr hasn’t one more ace up his sleeve: Douglas Greene has discovered (and revealed in his biography) that there exists yet another, hitherto unknown solution, a third explanation behind the inexplicable events of The Burning Court.

As the adage insists, will wonders never cease?

—John C. Tibbetts

**Anthologies and Reference Books on “Impossible Crimes”**

The standard reference work on the subject is Robert C.S. Adey’s *Locked Room Murders* (Minneapolis: Crossover Press, 1991). In addition to a valuable introductory essay on the historical development of the genre, there is also an extensive checklist of author and stories (including a brief description of each puzzle), and a section containing solutions to all the crimes. In the anthologies listed below (presented in chronological order of date of publication) there is no duplication of stories, attesting to the richness of the genre:

The most recent anthology is *Murder: Impossible*, edited by Robert Adey and Jack Adrian, Carroll & Graf, 1990.


Forthcoming books in the genre include several titles from Douglas G. Greene’s new imprint, Crippen & Landru (P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk VA 23505; (804) 623-3453): Speak of the Devil, by John Dickson Carr (a transcript of an 8-part radio serial), a long-lost impossible crime mystery set in Regency England; and Diagnosis: Impossible, the Problems of Dr. Sam Hawthorne, a collection of miracle crimes. Another project in the works from C&L is The Problem of the Ghost Woman: The Lost Cases of the Thinking Machine, a series of uncollected stories by Jacques Futrelle.

—J.C.T.