

*Mysterious Profile #5*

**Colin Dexter**



**Inspector Morse**



*Inspector Morse*  
by Colin Dexter

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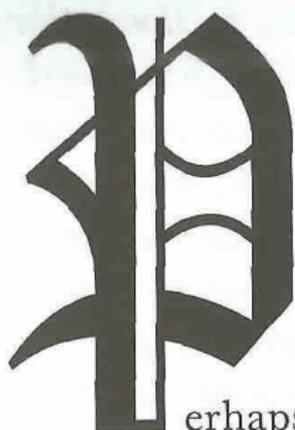
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Perhaps (I hope) the most sensible way for me to write about Chief Inspector Morse is to try to answer some of the many questions which have been put to me most frequently by audiences and correspondents. Then, at least, I can believe that my answers will be focused upon things in which people seem genuinely interested.

But first, a few brief words about myself. The whole of my working life was spent in education: first, as a teacher of Latin and Greek in English grammar schools; second, with increasing deafness blighting my life, as a

senior administrative officer with the Oxford Delegacy of Local Examinations, in charge of Latin, Greek, Ancient History, and English.

Well, here goes!

*What emboldened you to enlist in the rather crowded ranks of the crime-writing fraternity?*

It is not unknown, even in mid-summer, for the heavens to open in North Wales; and there are few things more dispiriting than to sit in a guest-house with the rain streaming in rivulets down the windows, and with offspring affirming that every other father somehow manages to locate a splendid resort, with blue skies and warm seas, for the annual family holiday. That was my situation one Saturday afternoon in August 1973. Having rather nervously asserted that we were *not* planning a premature return to Oxford, I shut myself up in the narrow confines of the kitchen with a biro and a pad of ruled paper—with only a very vague idea of what I was intending to do. I had already finished reading the two paperback detective stories left by previous guests, and I figured that, if I tried hard, I might possi-

bly do almost as well in the genre myself. So for a couple of hours I tried *very* hard. Resulting in how many paragraphs, I cannot recall. Yet I doubt more than two or three. It was, however, that all-important start: *Initium est dimidium facti* (the beginning is one half of the deed), as the Roman proverb has it.

Had I any reason other than vanity for wishing to see my name on the jacket of a detective story? Not money certainly, since I was fortunate enough to enjoy a well-paid university post, annually climbing a little higher up the salary scale. If as Dr. Johnson remarked—in uncharacteristically cynical vein—“no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money,” then I was one of the blockheads. And, again, not because I thought I had anything of criminological, psychological, or sociological import to communicate to my fellow man. I had just that one simple aim in mind—an aim to which I have always held firm in my subsequent writings: to tell a story that would entertain whatever readers might be coming my way.

It would be pleasing to report that later on that August Saturday afternoon the sun broke

through the lowering clouds. Yet, as I recall, it didn't. What I can report is that my first work of fiction, *Last Bus to Woodstock*, originated on that day, and was finally published by Macmillan in 1975. It featured a detective named Morse. "Just call me Morse!" as he was to say so many times when some delicious and desirable woman asked him for his Christian name. And that is how I shall refer to him throughout this article.

*Which crime writers and what kind of crime-writing may have influenced you?*

First memories for me are of Sexton Blake and Tinker; then Edgar Wallace ("King of Thriller Writers") with his racy and uncluttered style. Next Agatha Christie, pulling the wool over my eyes from page one in a myriad of imaginative and ingenious plots, and almost invariably baffling the delighted reader until the last chapter, last page, last paragraph.

And she more than any other writer determined the direction of my writing, with an emphasis more on "who" perpetrated the dreadful deed, rather than "why" or "how."

For some “dreadful deed” it had to be, since no reader will be overlong enthralled by the theft of a tin of salmon from the supermarket. It was Christie then who motivated my eagerness for surprise endings in the Morse novels. Other writers of course were influential, and like most other teenagers I was a great fan of Father Brown and Sherlock Holmes. But more importantly, I should mention John Dickson Carr (Carter Dickson) with his wonderfully “impossible” locked-room puzzles. I was never able to write such a mystery for Morse to solve, but again it was the “puzzle” element that delighted me so hugely. And it is not unfitting that in *Bloody Murder* Julian Symons writes of “the puzzles set by Colin Dexter,” gently adding that “perhaps it is churlish to suggest that motives and behavior were a touch nearer reality.” So often have I listened to some of my crime-writing colleagues arguing about the respective merits of “plot” versus “characterization.” But I have always viewed such discussions as somewhat phoney, since the totality of a good story subsumes them both, and the greatest accolade that any of us can hope for is

to hear one's partner's plea from a room downstairs: "I'll be up in a few minutes darling. Just let me finish this chapter first."

Furthermore, in this connection, there is little doubt in my mind that Homer and Ovid would have been the top earners in Hollywood. One other major influence: I had long envied the ability of some few writers, Simenon and Chandler in particular, to establish in their novels a curiously pleasing ambience of a city, a street, a bistro, etc. And I have ever hoped that the physical sense of Oxford, and the very spirit of the City, has permeated the pages in which Morse is summoned to so many (mostly fatal) scenes. Perhaps my one wholly legitimate claim to notoriety is that single-handedly I have made Oxford the murder capital of the UK—and probably of the EU.

*What sort of man was Morse? Was he like you?*

Of Morse's physical presence, I had very little idea. I had assumed, I suppose, that (unlike me) he measured up to the height specification for the police force; that his incurable addiction to Real Ale and single-malt Scotch

whiskey was gradually but inevitably adding a few inches to his girth; that unlike his creator he had a good head of hair; that to the world at large he paraded no deformities. He was in no way likely to be confused with the description I once gave of myself to a Finnish journalist: "short, fat, bald, and deaf"; on which the lady in question congratulated me warmly, saying that because of this she had recognized me "immediately"!

Morse's other qualities? Well, unless one is a genius, which I am not, a writer will tend in many respects to be semi-autobiographical in the delineation of the character and temperament of the detective hero. As such, Morse changes very little throughout the novels, betraying the same qualities in my first and, and as I thought at the time, my only one. He was, and remained, a sensitive and sometimes strangely vulnerable man; always a bit of a loner by nature; strongly attracted to beautiful women (often the crooks); dedicated to alcohol, and almost always on the verge of giving up nicotine; in politics, ever on the Left, feeling himself congenitally incapable of voting

for the Tory party; a "high-church atheist" (as I called him), yet with a deep love for the Methodist Hymnal, the King James' Bible, the church music of Byrd, Tallis, Purcell, etc, the sight of candles, and the smell of incense. Finally, like me, he would have given his hobbies in *Who's Who* as reading the poets, cross-words, and Wagner.

And what of the obverse? He was quite unwilling to give thanks to any of his hard-working underlings (especially Lewis); had little or no respect for most of his superior officers; was unorthodox, with little knowledge of police procedure and only minimal respect for forensic pathology; often pig-headed; impatient; a man with alpha-plus acumen, normally six furlongs ahead of the whole field during any investigation, but so often running on the wrong race course. And has there ever been a fictional detective so desperately mean with money?

On this latter point, I was encouraged by my editors to *exemplify* any fault rather than merely stating it. And I think that readers

began to expect such exemplification in each novel. For example, in *The Remorseful Day*, the pair of detectives are the first customers in the bar of Oxford's Randolph Hotel at 11:00 a.m., and Lewis's eyebrows are raised a few millimeters when, throwing the car-keys to Lewis, Morse suggests that it's high time he, Morse, bought the drinks: a large Glenfiddich for himself, and half a pint of orange juice for Lewis—only for the unfortunate barmaid to tell Morse that she cannot find sufficient change so early on for the £50 note proffered. Whereupon, patting his presumably empty pockets, Morse asks his sergeant if by any chance he has some appropriate small change on his person. (Here, I must admit, I had little difficulty in finding exemplars, with advanced symptoms of this odious trait, among a few of the Oxford dons I worked with.) But let me insert a caveat here. Mrs. Valerie Lewis (now alas killed in a hit-and-run accident) always knew whenever her husband was selected as Morse's lieutenant: there was a perceptible change in his step—if less change in his pocket.

*How did you get your first Morse novel published?*

I have ever maintained that luck, good and bad, plays a considerably larger part in our lives than most people are prepared to acknowledge. It was not always so. The Romans, for example, as well as regularly pouring their libations and sacrificing animals to their traditional pantheon, were also very careful to appease and to seek the approval of the goddess of good luck (Fortuna). We can all accept that a little talent and a lot of hard graft are indispensable concomitants in any worthy enterprise. But what a blessing if the gods collectively are occasionally smiling on us! As they were, after a few early frowns, upon me.

I had my manuscript typed up, with just the one heavily corrected and smudged carbon-copy, and asked around for the best bets among the publishing houses. Collins, Gollancz, and Macmillan, in that order, topped the list. I had no agent (still haven't) and I posted the typescript to Collins—from whom, after a chivvying letter from me, I received a letter about four months later. It was a pleasantly

argued letter of the kind that so many hopeful, budding authors have come to know only too well: an “if-ever-you-write-anything-else” kind of letter. A rejection letter. So, leaving out my second choice, I parcelled up *Last Bus to Woodstock* once more, and sent it to Macmillan, a publishing house with, as I learned, an increasingly prestigious crime-list.

Within 48 hours I received a phone call from the senior crime-editor there, Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, asking me to get up to London post haste. He had read my novel and was prepared to publish it without further ado (and without alteration!) “warts and all.” Later I learned that he had been suffering from a serious bout of flu at the time, and had requested that any new stories should be brought to his bedside. Whether or not his illness was impairing his judgment in any way, I just don’t know. What I do know is that the gods were smiling benevolently on me that particular weekend. Incidentally, when I say that I have never had an agent, that is strictly true. But I have ever stuck with Macmillan. And for over thirty years now successive

crime-editors—George Hardinge, Hilary Hale, Maria Rejt, and Beverley Cousins—have handled my literary affairs wonderfully well. I have been, let me repeat it, a very lucky writer.

*How and why did Morse come to make it on TV?*

In the 1980s the Independent Television Corporation (ITV) was looking for a new detective series, and simultaneously it appeared that many viewers wanted less violence, fewer gun-fights, and (please!) no more car chases. Several of the imported American crime programs were coming to the end of their runs, and perhaps the stage was being set for a quieter, more cerebral breed of detective, where brains were likely to be a better bet than brawn. The *Zeitgeist* was definitely changing. But there were some early doubts about whether Morse could and should fit the bill. It might well be, as someone pointed out at the time, that as well as being “more everything else,” such a program might also turn out to be more tedious. “Dexter’s idea of dramatic confrontation,” I read, “is a couple of Classics

dons arguing about Aristotle outside the 'shmolean.'" Fortunately for me, two very gifted men, each with huge experience in the TV world, were very much pro Morse. After reading some of my novels, both agreed that the beautiful city of Oxford would be an ideal setting for a series of murders, solved by a lugubrious Wagnerian and his solid (never stolid!) sidekick, would be a potential winner.

At a meeting in a north Oxford pub, *The Friar Bacon*, Kenny McBain, Anthony Minghella, Julian Mitchell, and myself drank a few pints of beer together and talked and talked of many things . . . of which I remember only one with clarity. When I suggested that after lunch I would with the greatest pleasure show them around a few of the murder sights in Oxford which I had already used, McBain smiled and declined my offer: "We've already visited them, Colin." After lunch, half launched upon the shores of light was *Inspector Morse* that day.

Thereafter, the whole machinery of the televisual requirements began to fall into place: the casting, the film scripts, the locations, the

schedules, the directors, the producers, etc. The biggest item of contention, as I recall, was the proposed one-night two-hour, prime time programming. I had thought that this was asking a little too much of our likely audience. I was wrong. But again, as with the books, I was extremely lucky. Things can of course so often go sadly awry, and several of my crime-writing colleagues have not experienced the good fortune of which I was continuously aware in ITV's treatment of *Inspector Morse*.

Wherein lay this good fortune? First and foremost it was undoubtedly in the casting of John Thaw and Kevin Whately as Morse and Lewis, with much of the credit for this resting with Ted Childs. Second, with the string of distinguished screen-play writers, directors, and producers ITV was able to enlist in the making of the thirty-three *Inspector Morse* episodes filmed. Third, with the sheer technical brilliance of the camera crews who somehow seemed perpetually enthused and exhilarated by the beauties of Oxford. Indeed, Oxford itself from the outset assumed a leading role in the series, with audiences a little disappointed

when the main body of the action was filmed in Australia or Italy or elsewhere. Fourth was the wonderful array of talent among supporting actors and actresses, both established media stars and newcomers alike, from Sir John Gielgud in *The Twilight of the Gods* to Elizabeth Hurley in *Last Seen Wearing*. To the best of my knowledge no one ever refused an invitation to take a part in the series, and on visits to Oxford characters as diverse as Ken Dodd and Charlton Heston light-heartedly informed the *Oxford Mail* that they had only the one remaining ambition in life: to be selected for a minor part in one of the programs. Fifth (and more of this anon), in Barrington Pheloung we had a musical genius. Finally I must mention the contagious camaraderie engendered among the film crews by such wise and experienced producers as Chris Burt.

For a brief while let me dwell separately on one of these factors—Oxford.

Morse's city, described *passim*, lived in, and murdered in, is not *only* the city of great men—scholars, historians, poets, scientists, doctors, churchmen, etc—whose portraits hang proudly

in many of the college dining halls used in the Morse episodes. Oxford is, and always was, the city of "Town" as well as "Gown." And one of my proudest possessions is the following citation: "The Lord Mayor and Oxford City Council place on record their appreciation of the literary talents of Colin Dexter who has been the most visual and the most watched novelist of our City. We are extremely grateful that in his novels he has shown our City as having a distinct and separate identity from its famous University." I was a bit like Morse myself: quite certainly *in* the University, but not wholly *of* the University. And whilst I am indulging in some self-gratification, let me admit to feeling a warm glow (forgive me!) on reading the words of the distinguished novelist and critic, Malcolm Bradbury: "Oxford generally imagines it is famous for dreaming spires, British prime ministers (and American presidents), Mathew Arnold, John Ruskin, Cardinal Newman, and Evelyn Waugh. But it is surely Dexter's Oxford that has laid the strongest imprint over the contemporary city, and it is

the Morse Tour that draws a great proportion of its visitors." All a bit over the top, I agree.

*How did you come up with the names of Morse and Lewis?*

Strangely enough, I spent 18 months in the Royal Signals Regiment doing my National Service, and became a high-speed Morse code operator, serving most of the time in West Germany (1948-50). That however had nothing to do with Chief Inspector Morse, whom I named after Sir Jeremy Morse, a man with as sweet and clear a brain as I have known. He was a former Chairman of Lloyds Bank, key member of the Bank of England and the IMF, Fellow of All Souls, Oxford, Warden of Winchester College, etc., etc., regularly parading his genius in chess problems and crossword puzzles. Indeed it was in the crossword world where as early as the mid-50s we became keen competitors—and later good friends. And when I wished to introduce a detective-hero of consummate mental caliber, the surname was staring me in the face, was it not?

What of his strange first name? In *The Wench is Dead*, Morse was taken to hospital in Oxford, where from his sick bed he was to solve a murder mystery of well over 100 years standing. To add, as I trust, a measure of verisimilitude to the situation, I had a medical chart fixed to the bottom of his bed, chiefly recording the regular functioning or non-functioning of his bladder and bowels. The chart was headed 'Mr. E. Morse.' Now there are many men's first names beginning with 'E,' from Eamon to Ezra, and I had no idea at all which one was Morse's. Understandably so really, since first-name terms were a bit of a rarity in my day. At school I was 'Dexter (ii),' with my older brother 'Dexter (i)'; in the army I was '922 Dexter,' the last three digits of my army number; as a schoolmaster I was just 'Dexter' to my colleagues, and 'Sir' to my pupils; and at Oxford, in correspondence to the many hundreds of examiners for whom I was responsible, it was ever "Dear Jones," "Dear Smith," etc., with "Dear Miss/Mrs Whatever" for the ladies. But just "Morse" was not going to be wholly satisfactory hence-

forth, since some of the leading bookmakers had produced a list of odds, with 'Ernest,' I believe, a common favorite. So I had to come up with something, and I did. In previous novels I had informed my readers that Morse's mother was a Quaker, and that his father's great hero was Captain Cook. An examination of the New England Quaker lists threw up a variety of names—not just the familiar "Faith," "Hope," and "Charity," but others, also enshrining comparable Christian virtues. And it was my wife Dorothy who discovered "Determination" Davies, and (yes!) "Endeavour" Jones. Things had been settled then. "It is now 'Endeavour Morse,'" wrote a correspondent to *The Times*, "endeavour more shall be so!" I broke the news at the end of *Death Is Now My Neighbor*, whereupon Lewis was heard to mumble "You poor sod, sir."

What about Lewis? Like that of Morse, the surname was taken from another of my favorite crossword rivals, Dorothy Taylor, who took the *nom de guerre* "Mrs. B. Lewis" when entering crossword competitions. Lewis is a good name for a Welshman, and Lewis was a

Welshman when I first wrote of him; roughly the same age as Morse, too. ITV's decision to make him a younger man, with a Geordie accent, was taken without consultation with me, and indeed without my knowledge. Yet I did not remonstrate, nor, as it happens, should I have done so. After viewing the first TV episode of Morse, *The Dead of Jericho*, I realized that the casting of Kevin Whately as Lewis was a happy triumph, effecting a semi-surrogate father-son relationship between the two detectives. In subsequent Morse novels I solved the obvious discrepancy in the most cowardly of all ways—I ignored it completely, never giving further physical descriptions of Sergeant Lewis. His first name, though? In the episode *Promised Land*, Lewis (not Morse!) joined the Aussie lager-boys joyously; and the matey Oz culture naturally necessitated a first name. “Robbie,” we decided, was as appropriate as any.

*What sort of problems arose with the adaptation of the Morse novels to the TV series?*

Each medium, written novel and televised version of it, has its own distinctive strengths—

and weaknesses. In a crime-novel, a writer can get away with anything; can literally get away with murder, or multiple murders (as I know perfectly well). And if I wish to write "Lewis decided to risk jumping down the 20 foot wall, and happily landed uninjured," there is no problem. In reality however, on TV, he would either break his leg(s), or call in a stuntman, or get the cameraman to fiddle the scene. In a novel, I can put a convenient end to some wicked malefactor by having a pack of rabid Rottweilers tear him literally to pieces, and even describe the process. With TV, life is still regarded as a little more precious. The big advantage of TV, of course, is that the viewer can *see* what's happening, and where it's happening. A very simple example would be the fabric of the city of Oxford. Whilst I may indulge myself for a couple of paragraphs on describing the effect of sunlight on the cinnamon-colored stone of an Oxford college, TV can do it in a few seconds—and do it *better*. It is the combination of such camera-work with the accompanying dialogue, which is, and which has to be, the *modus operandi* of

television, this being the only obvious means available of carrying forward the development of any drama. Why? Because it is not at all easy to *think* on TV. What is the point of any actor's face filling the screen for twenty seconds or so, hand to face like Rodin's "Thinker," saying nothing at all, but looking—well, looking *thoughtful*, just above the sub-title "Do not adjust your set"? Unless . . . unless one has a quite remarkable actor (and John Thaw was such a one) who could communicate by silence, by the slightest movement of his facial features, and most particularly by his eyes. In a novel, if he so purposes, a writer may indulge in "thinking" all the time on every page, never veering from some "stream of consciousness" flow, even to get up for a cup of tea. Television's compensatory benefit is the use it may so readily make of music. None of us expects (or wants) to find an occasional CD stuck on to the pages of a novel. But music has been a wonderfully appropriate accompaniment to many TV programs—as it was to *Inspector Morse*.

### *How important was music in the TV programs?*

Early on in the series, one critic wrote that, for him, watching *Morse* was becoming a bit of a routine: bedroom slippers on, wine bottle(s) opened, phone off the hook—all rather like anticipating an evening with Schubert. Well, we'll come to Schubert in a while, but let us start at the beginning.

Barrington Pheloung's introductory theme-music was a splendid opening, with its fusion of a fine melody with the 'da-ditty-da' rhythm of the Morse code. (Incidentally, it was later put to words and appeared on the pop-charts.) It was not, as some have supposed, a clever, surely *too* clever, means of tapping out the letters of the crook's name. It was, quite simply, a poignant, haunting motif that set exactly the right tone and mood that the series required. After the individual episodes developed, music became integral to the moods, actions, and meanings of the scenes being portrayed. Let me give some illustrations of how it all worked, for which we owe everything to Barrington.

My own musical loves have centered predominantly on the latter half of the nineteenth century, especially Wagner (of course!), Bruckner, Mahler, and (later) Richard Strauss. Fairly obviously the musical tastes of Morse mirrored my own. And, being mentioned frequently in the novels, they had some influence on many of the musical extracts used by Barrington, as did the favorites of Kenny McBain, particularly in the latter case Mozart's clarinet compositions. Which illustrations do I particularly remember? Vivaldi's *Gloria* at the beginning of the first TV program, *The Dead of Jericho*; Callas singing *Tosca* in *The Ghost in the Machine*; Ella Fitzgerald's voice in *Driven to Distraction*; Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (*passim*) in *Masonic Mysteries*; the Schubert Quintet in *Dead on Time*; the Immolation Scene from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* in *Twilight of the Gods*; and the Prelude to Wagner's *Parsifal* in *The Remorseful Day*. I could go on and on. . . . And I will do a little, since I should not forget Barrington's catchy composition *Truckin' Till I'm Dead* in *Promised Land*; nor his original rave music in *Cherubim and Seraphim*.

If, as is often claimed, music is more able than other arts to give expression and form to our innermost feelings, let me single out the two examples which I found most memorable of all. First, the ethereal extract from the finale of Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* in *Promised Land*, when Morse mounts the steps of the Sydney Opera House. Does opera ever rise above such glorious heights? Second, the extraordinarily moving *In Paradisum* from Fauré's *Requiem* in *The Remorseful Day*, which includes the wonderful words *et cum Lazaro, quondam paupere, aeternam habeas requiem* ("and with Lazarus, once a poor man, you may have eternal rest"). Inspector Morse would have opted for it at his funeral, as I shall at mine.

*Did you have any discipline about the times you set aside for writing?*

No.

*Why did you kill off Morse?*

I didn't. He died of natural causes—a virtually inevitable consequence of a lifetime spent with "cigarettes and whiskey," though not with

“wild, wild, women.” The cigarettes were always a problem, and Morse gave them up on innumerable occasions—usually every day. Alcohol, however, was a different matter, with real ale and single-malt Scotch his favored tipples. Frequently, with Lewis, he sought to perpetuate the claim that he needed to drink in order to think, and indeed there was clearly some justification for such a claim. Whiskey, if drunk copiously, may have at least three possible effects: the legs may buckle, the speech become blurred, the brain befuddled. But Morse had no trouble with this last effect. His brain was sharper than ever, his imagination bolder, even his deep pessimism concerning the future of the planet a fraction modified. A longer-term effect was that his health grew worse, and he knew the score as well as any of the medical consultants whom Morse steadfastly refused to visit.

But there were, if I am honest, several other reasons why I decided to end the Morse era. First, it is my opinion that few crime-writers manage to sustain their previously high level of output as they get older, and I had nei-

ther the ambition nor the need to try to join that select few. Second, my health was not robust, and becomes progressively worse now. Third, I felt that I had said enough about the relationship between Morse and Lewis, and I realized that the repeated exemplifications of Morse's character traits were becoming somewhat cliché-ridden, with a good deal of the original freshness lost. Finally, I realized that I hadn't many (any?) further plots left in my head to construct and develop. All right, we could have had a gentle ending, with Morse at last realizing his dreams of fair women, getting wed, and living happily ever after. But even my great hero Chandler made a sad mistake, in *Playback*, in my opinion, when providing a regular nuptial bed for Philip Marlowe and a beautiful lady.

***You wrote only 13 full-length Morse novels. How come there were 33 episodes?***

The Morse short-stories I had written were too insubstantial for any two-hour treatment. After the novels were exhausted, I was asked by Kenny McBain if I could come up with four

new plot-outlines for the subsequent year's quartet. I should have said no, since I was still a greenhorn in this TV business, and had little idea what such a task would entail.

I wrote two excessively lengthy 'outlines,' for *The Ghost in the Machine* and for *Deceived by Flight*, both over sixty pages, as I recall. I then struggled through a third—and gave up on the fourth, realizing at last that my brain was quite unable to cope with such an assignment. From that point, screenplay writers were invited not just to adapt something I had written, but to produce original scripts. There were two dangers in this.

First, that new writers might not be fully aware of the firm characterization already established for both Morse and Lewis. Second, that perhaps some writers might think it appropriate, knowing the two characters well, to develop them accordingly to their own lights and likings. For one or the other of these reasons, several promising stories could not be accepted. And since the copyright of Morse (and indeed of Lewis) remains and will remain with me, my role developed into that of an

amateur consultant, occasionally with the directors, but usually with the producers, especially Chris Burt. I hope and believe that such consultations and suggested revisions have been of value.

*What notice do you take of the critics?*

One or two novelists I know would have no hesitation in answering: "No notice whatsoever, since I never read them." I respect their independence of spirit, but I am not amongst them. When in the early days I got a mention anywhere, I eagerly sought out the review, and felt deep satisfaction if it was even mildly commendatory, begging Macmillan to send me photocopies of similar mentions in their files. My style, I soon learned, was "mandarin" and "labyrinthine," and although not quite sure of the significance of either epithet, I rather enjoyed them both. "Alas, the style..." were the first three words of a shortish review once in *The Times*, and I read no more. I had a mixed bag of reviews from the pens of some distinguished critics, including A. N. Wilson, a writer I (once!) admired, who told his readers

that he just could not read my pages. I was tempted to get my own back on him by never reading any more of *his* pages. On the other hand, I well remember treasuring (forgive me!) the judgment of Marcel Berlins, UK's most respected crime critic, who wrote that Morse was now "a giant among fictional detectives."

I wrote to only two reviewers. One was a local woman, herself an embryo crime-writer, I believe, who accused me (or was it Morse?) of being a "breast fetishist" in *The Way Through the Woods*. Although I could see little reason for being ashamed of such an interest in the female form, I did look quickly through the novel, finding only ". . . and Morse glanced appreciatively at the décolletage of her black dress as she bent forward with the wine list."

The second was Christopher Wordsworth, a fine and perceptive critic, who (inadvertently, I'm sure) had given a red-hot hint about the identity of the murderer. Such lapses are most irritating and, I'm relieved to say, are considerably less common in the UK, than in the US, where fuller reviews and detailed blurbs are not infrequently mines of informa-

tion. Why on earth not allow readers to discover for themselves exactly what is going to happen? Yet I should be grateful that today reviews are taken more seriously than they were a few decades ago, when only two or three carefully crafted sentences would usually suffice—sometimes brilliantly so.

I well recall a film critic giving his judgment on the latest block-busting biblical epic from Hollywood in four words: "God at his best."

Let me add one final sentence. I never allowed anyone, not even my wife Dorothy, to read my novels before they were dispatched to my publisher. It was only then that I was ready for any criticism. All writers of course will sometimes wince silently at some of their earlier offerings, and wish to amend them. I remember, for example, once having Morse enjoying "a pint of the amber fluid" instead of "a pint of bitter." The only changes I always made, when checking copy for omnibuses etc, involved crossing out "Lancia" and substituting "Jaguar" because ITV were unable to come up with an ancient Lancia and instead

purchased, for some ridiculously give-away price, a maroon-colored Jaguar Mark II, 1962, which, fully and luxuriously refurbished, recently changed hands for £150,000.

### *What really makes Morse tick?*

Earlier I gave my own three greatest joys in life as crosswords, Wagner, the poets, and vicariously I tried to exemplify these interests/hobbies/passions, both in the novels and in the TV programs.

Crosswords? Well, Morse could almost invariably finish *The Times* crossword at break-neck speed (he was considerably quicker than I) and in his vainer moments he would claim that solving that newspaper's puzzle was the veritable benchmark of mental acumen and flexibility. Sometimes, however, he could cheat just a little. In *The Wench Is Dead*, for example, we read that Morse "bought *The Times* at the bookstall, got a seat at the rear of the train and had solved the puzzle in ten minutes before reaching Didcot. Except for one clue. . . . He quickly wrote in a couple of bogus letters in case any fellow passengers were waiting to be

impressed." He did try once to interest Lewis in the delights of the cryptic crossword, but in vain.

Wagner? I attempted perhaps rather laboriously to explain Morse's passion for music. It would have been very difficult for him to explain such a passion to Lewis, just as it is for me here to put these things into words. Much better surely for both of us to *feel* them? Once, in a car together, Morse betrayed an impatient arrogance when Lewis mistook an aria from *Tosca* sung by Maria Callas for a lively tune from *Cats*. But then Morse was a musical snob, who would have had no sympathy whatsoever with a woman I knew who had seen *The Sound of Music* on fifteen occasions. Such contempt was not Morse's most attractive trait, was it? But perhaps we should forgive him.

The Poets? Certainly Morse spent much time reading poetry with deep and abiding love, both the English and the Classical poets. Occasionally read them aloud, too, as in *The Remorseful Day*, when seated one summer evening in *The Victoria Arms* with a pint of beer on the table in front of him, he gazed west-

ward towards a miraculous sunset and recited a poem by Housman—a poet who, like Morse, had failed to get a degree from St. John's College, Oxford.

*How clear, how lovely bright,  
How beautiful to sight  
    Those beams of morning play;  
How heaven laughs out with glee  
Where, like a bird set free,  
Up from the eastern sea  
    Soars the delightful day.  
To-day I shall be strong,  
No more shall yield to wrong,  
    Shall squander life no more;  
Days lost, I know not how,  
I shall retrieve them now;  
Now I shall keep the vow  
    I never kept before.  
Ensanguining the skies  
How heavily it dies  
    Into the west away;  
Past touch and sight and sound,  
Not further to be found,  
How hopeless under ground  
    Falls the remorseful day.*

*(More Poems XVI)*

Unusually for the melancholy Housman, this poem has an almost playful touch. The remorse here is for unfulfilled intention, an emotion experienced by most of us every day. But not by John Thaw, perhaps, whose life afforded a fulfilment of his ambitions and a manifestation of his extraordinary talents.

*Did John Thaw ever say anything to you that you particularly remember?*

Let me be honest. No one has ever asked me that question, but I would like to answer it. He told me that he enjoyed playing Inspector Morse more than any other role, and for me that was an unforgettable compliment. I can just about understand why that great actor thought so. For me John Thaw *was* Inspector Morse. And in my will I have specifically stated that for as long as the copyright on the character remains with me, I shall permit no other actor to follow him. No other actor *could* follow him.

## COLIN DEXTER

Born in Lincolnshire in 1930, Colin Dexter graduated from Cambridge University and spent most of his professional life as an educator in his beloved Oxford. He came comparatively late to crime writing, being already in his forties when he attempted his first novel, *Last Bus to Woodstock*, which was accepted by the second publisher to which it was sent. It introduced Inspector Morse, the somewhat curmudgeonly senior officer in the Criminal Investigation Department with the Thames Valley Police, and Sergeant Lewis, who appeared in every one of his 13 novels and most of the short stories collected in *Morse's Greatest Mystery and Other Stories* (1993).

Among his numerous awards are Gold Daggers from the (British) Crime Writers' Association for *The Wench Is Dead* (1989) and *The Way Through the Woods* (1992) and the Platinum Dagger for lifetime achievement, presented to him in 1997.

The hugely successful television series, produced by ITV in England and shown in the United States on PBS, was based on the books and additional stories; it starred John Thaw and Kevin Whateley, running for 33 episodes from 1987 to 2000. Like Alfred Hitchcock did in his films, Colin Dexter has brief cameo appearances in most of the episodes.

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