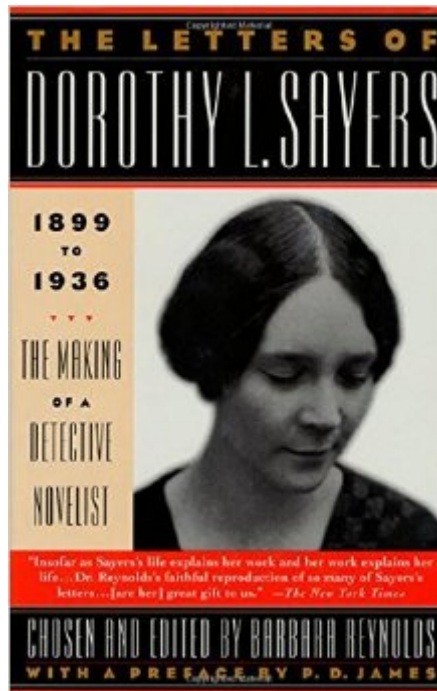


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# The Letters Of Dorothy L. Sayers: 1899-1936: The Making Of A Detective Novelist



## Synopsis

A collection of letters written by the great mystery novelist to friends and family provides revealing glimpses of Sayers's childhood, undergraduate career at Oxford, secret love affair and illegitimate child, mystery writing, and more.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As Baroness P. D. James states in her preface to this engrossing book, "we have what is in effect an epistolary autobiography" of the young Dorothy L. Sayers, from age five to forty-three, when the author became the household word that she is today. (Later letters comprise volume two.) The earliest letters are sprinkled with references to poems, plays or short stories that she had written, in any-or all-of the four languages at her command (English, French, German and Latin.) She fell madly in love with the theatre, not to mention the leading men of the era. Before she reached the age of thirteen, she had read (in the original French) *The Three Musketeers*, and from that time on, referred to her family and assorted locations by their assigned names from the book. She took for herself the identity of Athos. At eighteen, her headmistress announced that Dorothy had come top in all England in the Cambridge Higher Local Examinations with distinction in French and spoken German. The following year she entered Somerville College at Oxford. Men as men didn't enter her life until she had completed Oxford. She fell in love only once, but they couldn't marry due to multiple differences in values. Subsequently, she had a short-lived affair with another man, who was the father of her only child, a son raised by Dorothy's cousin. Their roles were reversed in the boy's life; the cousin was his 'Mum' and Dorothy his aunt. Not until after her death did the truth come

out. These letters bring to vivid life the enigma who was known world-wide as the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey, the perfect foil. She couldn't afford a luxurious flat, a Daimler, or an Axminster carpet; she could, however, provide them for Lord Peter. She made him and his family and his possessions incredibly real for her millions of readers. Any devotee of Lord Peter Wimsey will be exceedingly grateful to Barbara Reynolds for her years of loving care in sorting through and editing these letters of one of the world's great novelists. We can but wait-patiently-for volume two, in order to learn how Dorothy wore her hard-earned and well-deserved fame.

Dorothy L. Sayers is known to many readers as the creator of the Wimsey detective novels. Written in the 1920s and 30s, these books earned Sayers a living and a great deal of respect in the genre, but they are not enough to know about this brilliant and complex woman. Sayers was born in 1893 in Oxford, England. She was one of the first women to be granted a degree from Oxford University and earned her living at an advertising agency for some years, and then by her writing. Besides the detective novels and short stories, she wrote poetry, drama, essays and literary criticism, and translated Dante's *Divina Commedia*, a project which was incomplete at her death in 1957. In her late twenties she had a love affair that ended badly, and from a "rebound relationship" with another man she became pregnant; the child was raised by her cousin and the truth of his parentage was not known until after Sayers' death. In her early thirties she married a journalist who became disabled, leaving her with the ongoing responsibility of earning the family living. Sayers was from her earliest years a prolific and entertaining correspondent. This first volume of her letters is presented by Barbara Reynolds, who is Sayers' god-daughter, literary collaborator and biographer. The annotations add enormous clarity and value to the collection so that it could be enjoyed by a reader with very little knowledge of Sayers' life and times. From a six-year-old's domestic concerns, the letters go on to cover Dorothy's successes and enthusiasms at boarding school and Oxford. As her writing career begins to develop there is a fascinating look at the publishing world from an author's perspective. Wimsey fans: there is a wealth of background on the novels and short stories. The letters to her lover John Courson are the most poignant, and her ongoing interest in her son is a constant theme. Sayers' letters are breezy, literate, and ninety-miles-per-hour. While the entire book is wildly quotable, I include just a few examples of her style. To her former lover: "I kept your letter for a week before I read it, because I do so hate getting worked up--it's such headachey work going to the office after howling all night..." To her publisher in London: "Having first assured myself that it was NOT your offices which the crane fell through last night (which might have seemed an ill omen, had it occurred), I proceed to enclose ..." To her publisher cataloging the renovation of her flat: "The

Cat is investigating the mysterious cavities between the joists of the flooring, with a view to getting nailed down under the floor, if possible ... I am trying to look ... like Dido building Carthage, and hoping (as I daresay she did) that the hammering will soon be over. Life is very wonderful. We are doing our best." Dorothy L. Sayers: hard-working woman in a world designed for men, passionate about education and religion, a fine writer and an inspiring correspondent, challenged in her personal life. My respect for her and her work is enormous. If you are interested in learning more about this prodigious woman, you'll find a treasure trove in this first volume of her letters. Linda Bulger, 2008

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