



The Roman Hat Mystery

Ellery Queen

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A fine silk custom top-hat is missing from a crooked lawyer who was poisoned by lead alcohol in the Roman theater at the close of the second act, 9:55 pm. Inspector Richard Q, sneezing snuff; a thin, multi-faced, small "Old Man"; and the Inspector's large writer son Ellery, puffing cigarettes, investigate. They start with maps of theater, the victim's bedroom, and a list of names appended with flavorful commentary: the finder of the body is "cranially a brachycephalic", and Dolly "a lady of reputation". The flavor of 1929 costume and culture, with evening attire de rigueur, and hip flasks full of bootleg liquor.

The Roman Hat Mystery Details

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Author : Ellery Queen

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From Reader Review The Roman Hat Mystery for online ebook

Learnin Curve says

My goodness the a lot of people reviewing this know very little about the golden age of detective fiction or indeed, history.

Firstly, no chit there is a lot about a hat in it. For that young lady who did not understand why they focused on it so much - everyone wore hats in that era, a missing hat would be as incongruous then as a missing wallet would be to us today.

Secondly, educated people in America in the late 1920s spoke and behaved like that, rating a book low because of it speaks volumes.

Thirdly, they repeat themselves? Gadzooks, avoid Sayers if that's a complaint.

Lastly. Removing the racism from old books is called "white washing" and it's wrong. Racism was the norm back then, especially in the days of segregated America. Removing it from books would be as nuts as Germany removing all references to the war because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.

It's clearly the genesis of American detective fiction, in that context it's genius, easy to say it's not as good as the ones which came later, and you can say that of all the greats, but at the time of writing they had very few peers to use as reference. Yes Christie had been published a few years earlier but it was in 1935 when penguin published her books at an affordable price for everyone that she really gained in popularity.

Anyway, it reads like a play, I would guess that was the reason it was set in a theatre. Very fast paced with very few wasted words. If this is considered the worst one in the series then I'm very much looking forward to reading the rest.

David Magnenat says

This first Ellery Queen novel is widely regarded as mediocre at best and significantly worse than many later books. This is the first EQ I've read and had I known beforehand what the general opinion was, i would likely have skipped it and picked up a later mystery.

The Roman Hat Mystery is the first of several "national" novels by the cousins writing as Ellery Queen. (The first few novels have a country as part of the title: The Egyptian Cross Mystery, the Dutch Show Mystery, etc.) The Roman of the title here is a theater in which a murder occurs during a play. The hat is, well, a hat. And the mystery is, of course, "whodunit."

The Cousins Queen (Dannay and Lee) cast Ellery as a rather arrogant fop, a little absent minded, polishing his pince-nez and walking with a stick in a dandyish sort of way. Father Richard Queen, Inspector NYPD, is at once the focus of the piece and the recipient of just the right amount of received wisdom from his son at just the right times. The elder Queen is uneven, seemingly moving from calm and wise to irate and bullying

in a flash. This quixotic behavior is annoying to read as it makes for a vague and random character.

Another mark of this first novel attempt is the near constant repetition of "here's what we know so far." Father and son review the facts of the case nearly every time they are alone together. While this is to be expected in a fair play mystery, the execution here is clunky and artificial.

The mystery itself is intricate but solidly founded in a clear logic chain. I am hoping that as I read later novels the construction will continue to be high quality and the execution and characterizations improve in quality to match.

Also in my to-read queue is "Blood Relations: Selected Letters of Ellery Queen" by Joseph Goodrich. Goodrich collected and has published a series of letters the cousins wrote each other while writing the Ellery Queen novels; they famously did not get along -- could barely stand each other, in fact -- and yet managed to produce some of the best American detective stories ever written. It promises to be a fascinating look at the writing process and a lucrative yet difficult relationship between two gifted artists.

John Frankham says

The first, 1929, Ellery Queen whodunnit, jointly authored as a competition entry.

Interesting set-up, with New York Inspector Richard Queen, abetted by his non-cop son Ellery, in investigating the theatre murder of a crooked lawyer. Almost like a couple of private investigators with detectives to do the hard yards. But where has the man's top hat gone ...?

Rather uneven. 4* is a little generous. An interesting solution to the hat mystery, and a splendid denouement that rather emphasises the plodding and repetitive nature of the Queens' investigations.

I read that the subsequent novels were superior, so will certainly read some more

Megan says

I am not huge on making reviews, but I have to say I believe this book gets a bad rap... so many 2 stars? crazy...

I thoroughly enjoyed it! I enjoyed how the book was written, and the crime being solved by deductive reasoning. The step into the past, and the feel for the time period. Even though there wasn't a bunch of "action", my interest was kept. I listened to this book on my audible, and to me it was a wonderful "who-done-it" logic puzzle. I plan on reading the next in the series!

Julie says

Read for book club bingo, book by two authors.

Oh, Ellery Queen. I started with the introduction, and so I read about how much Manny and Danny, I think the authors colloquially called each other, enjoyed creating plots and puzzles, and how much they loved

golden age detective fiction. For that enthusiasm and zeal, I'd like to give this book 4 stars. "A" for effort. But as a novel, it's lacking a lot in... the things that make a story readable. The plot is solid. The clues are precise. The dialog is... Plentiful. But there's not enough else.

When I start a series, I start at the beginning. In this case, I would have been better served to start with a different piece of the Ellery Queen cannon. So, I will read more Ellery Queen, because he's an important name in mystery and detective fiction, but I will not recommend this book.

Homunculus says

Guter geradliniger Krimi, in dem man irgendwie während des Lesens so gar keine Ahnung hat wer der Mörder denn sein könnte. ;-)

Daher fällt die Auflösung dann doch sehr umfangreich und irgendwie kompliziert aus, so dass man sich stark konzentrieren muss.

Donna says

The very first Ellery Queen mystery and well done. I kind of like the "breaking of the fourth wall" where the reader is informed that they now have all of the clues and should be able to solve the mystery. Richard Queen seems more prominent than his son, Ellery, but he gives Ellery credit for solving the case. Interesting puzzle.

Cathy says

The story was a little boring, and the motive was kind of shocking. I had to remind myself that this was published in 1929. I suppose it's representative of it's time.

Jill Hutchinson says

What fun!!!! This is the first of the Ellery Queen series and is nothing like the ones to follow. This book was written in 1929 and is reflective of the times....prohibition, walking sticks, spats, and racial epithets/beliefs not acceptable to the modern audience. But it must be read in the context of society of that time. Ellery is a somewhat mannered twit but not as bad as his counterpart from that time, Philo Vance. Regardless, this is a good little book with a ridiculously intricate plot that sets the stage for a very successful character who lived on in books, radio, movies and television.

The Queen series improved over the years and should be read chronologically to enjoy the changes that take place as the characters find their personalities.

David Monroe says

Wow. Truly a product of its time. Unlike Dashiell Hammett, Sinclair Lewis, Agatha Christie or Rex Stout -- very little of Ellery Queen's (Frederic Dannay and James Yaffe) writing holds up a century later.

Qube says

Re-reading Ellery Queen after decades! And I enjoying it thoroughly.

I find that my perspective has changed over 35-40 years, from the time I first read this novel as a student. The mystery is far less confounding (even though I had completely forgotten the plot and the solution), but it isn't fair to judge pioneering authors with decades and decades of hindsight.

I also find myself taking exception to snuff taking even if the character is one of the two protagonists. I don't remember finding it disgusting as I do now. The writing style, which was appropriate for the age it was written in, feels stilted now and a little tiresome. The exaggerated casualness of dialogue seems affected.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed it immensely, and plan to read the next few till I get bored of it.

Tommy Verhaegen says

Een goede Queen die het gebruikelijke stramien volgt. Een moord, vader Queen die er bij geroepen wordt en er zijn zoon Ellery bij betreft. Velie die vader Queen beschermt en dienst doet als duvel-doet-al met een Djuna vol jeugdige overmoed op de achtergrond.

Een lijk, meerder verdachten, politie staat voor raadsel, Ellery maakt vorderingen en komt soms op een verkeerd spoor terecht. Goeien en slechten, niet noodzakelijk in de categorie die je verwacht.

Dit boek is duidelijk gedateerd: racisme omwille van druppeltje negerbloed, klassejustitie als normaal voorgesteld.

Los daarvan leest het vlot en is een topper in het whodunit genre zoals alle boeken met Ellery Queen in de hoofdrol.

Een geniale oplossing via logisch redeneren gegarandeerd.

Toch bleef ik als lezer met een aantal vragen zitten, maar misschien moet ik het boek gewoon nog een lezen...

Mmyoung says

This is one of those books that are so firmly set in the time of their publication that it is difficult to rate them now on their own merits independent of their placement in the development of their genre. Ellery Queen, detective novel writer and son of Inspector Richard Queen, is the co-protagonist at the center of the early Ellery Queen books. The character of Ellery is clearly inspired by S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance. The prejudices and attitudes of the time of its initial publication (1929) are obvious with incidents of casual gender, class, education and race biases cropping up throughout. The continuous discussion in the book about the difficulty of solving such a mysterious crime hides the fact that answer to "who was the murderer" is fairly obvious and the most important clue would have been found within hours of the murder had the police been even minimally competent.

In addition it is hard, when reading this first Ellery Queen novel, to shake off the impressions left by reading Ellery Queens written half a century later and even more, it is almost impossible not to see Jim Hutton in the mind's eye whenever Ellery comes into a room.

Wayne says

The book I read prior to this one was Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* published in 1920. Christie is the Grand Dame of mystery writing. However, I find her books lacking in the human element. For her, characters are merely the vehicles through which she plots her stories. Even her main characters, like Marple and Poirot, do not rise much above the role of the person who solves the mysteries. Fast forward nine years and we arrive in America in 1929. The book is *The Roman Hat Mystery* by Ellery Queen. How different these two books are.

I found *The Roman Hat Mystery* to be atmospheric, an interesting glimpse at lifestyles from another time and the characters - even the peripheral ones - have personalities. The characters are written in such a way that you see them as more than the cardboard figures Christie populates her novels with.

The mystery in Queen's book is as convoluted as anything Christie could come up with. But, the cast of characters and the attention to the details of life in the period in which the book is written makes it more than a boring genre read. There is humor, there are social observations and the advancement of the story is enjoyable. My mom read many Ellery Queen books. Having read this one, I now know why.

Ellery Queen and his father are interesting characters. I found the writing above what one usually finds in genre fiction. The story was told in a very entertaining way. If you like mysteries, I recommend reading Ellery Queen. The books stand the test of time because they offer realistic glimpses into how life was lived during a time long ago. To say the books are dated is not to recognize that life was not always as conceited and self-important as it has become in today's world.

Kavita says

A man is found dead in a theatre during a play and the police are called in. Inspector Richard Queen shows up with his son Ellery, and thus begins the story of the first Ellery Queen novel. The plot starkly brings out its setting in the 1920s since the mystery basically hinges around a missing top hat. The victim's hat is missing and no one went out of the theatre with two hats. Where is the missing hat and what is its significance? The plot is well-constructed and hangs together remarkably well.

But nevertheless, I was not overly impressed by this first effort of Messrs. Daniel Nathan and Manfred Lepofsky. What could have been a great read was rendered mediocre because the authors chose to follow the police action and hide everything of interest from the reader till the last chapter. The narrative hinges around the missing hat to such an extent that it takes up the bulk of the book. Without character development, we don't get a sense of the various characters, not even as seen through the eyes of Queen. The narrative gets stuck in finding the hat and apart from a couple of interactions with the suspects, the dialogues are mostly the Queens and the policemen discussing the case among themselves, which was not sufficient to retain interest. The narrative is also repetitive with the same thing being rehashed over and over again.

Ellery was a vague character throughout the book and in the second half, he just disappears. Inspector Queen seems to be suffering some sort of personality disorder since he consistently changes mood, even within the same scene. One moment he is bright and cheerful and the next, he is bawling out at people. He also has a creepy dependency on his son and goes into depression when Ellery so much as goes for a vacation! However, this is the one character who is fully fleshed out in the book.

There is some racism in the book as well, but that's to be expected. Still, it hits you rather hard when the black houseboy of Queen is consistently compared to a monkey, and leaves a bad taste in the mouth. It's rather hard to take even taking the times into account. The motive for the crime is also slightly racist but it appeared realistic and interesting because it fit the period.

The book is certainly of historical interest and to mystery lovers, it's the first of an important series of golden age mysteries that defined the genre. So it must always be of interest to some of us. But taken purely as a novel, it does not stand up very well.
