



The Theban Mysteries

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For a century, wealthy New York girls have been trained for the rigors of upper class life at the Theban, an exclusive private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Kate Fansler is lured back to her alma mater to teach a seminar on *Antigone*. But a hostile note addressed to Kate, the uniform mistrustfulness of her six, bright students, and the Dobermans that patrol the building at night suggest trouble on the spot. As Kate leads her class through the inexorable tragic unfolding of *Antigone*, a parallel nightmare envelops the school and everyone connected with it. . . .

The Theban Mysteries Details

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Author : Amanda Cross , Carolyn G. Heilbrun

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From Reader Review *The Theban Mysteries* for online ebook

Boweavil says

Well written, lightweight, fun, literate and a page turner. Enjoy.

meeners says

i've decided that amanda cross must be my patron saint. there's hardly any mystery in this book, but who cares! i'd be happy if this entire book was just kate fansler meditating wisely and compassionately on life, the universe, and everything (which basically it is). i'm reminded actually of a quote from the first book: "She had learned as a college teacher that if one simplified what one wished to say, one falsified it. It was possible only to say what one meant, as clearly as possible." yes indeed!

Lindsey says

A surprisingly quick read - begun and finished in one evening. First published in 1971, the book is the fourth (apparently) in a feminist detective series featuring academic Kate Fansler. This is the first I've read, so it took a few pages to understand the set up. Kate is university literature professor, but in this book is on sabbatical for a semester in order to write a book on the Victorians. Instead, she's drafted by her Alma mater, an all girls day school in NYC called the Theban, to teach a senior seminar on the Greek play *Antigone*. It is at the school that Kate meets with an unexplained death....

1971 New York City is an interested change of pace for me. The book is truly a time capsule of the social and political change taking place. Several plot points hinge on draft dodging, and there is continued debate between multiple characters about the liberal hippies and youth of today versus the conservative, traditional, and patriotic older generation.

I'd be interested in reading another in the series.

Jennifer Heise says

Rather more political-history/literature musing than mystery, but an interesting document about how those who had been part of the old, pre-1960s intelligentsia world experienced the changes, both good and bad, brought about by the 60s and early 70s: what they thought about the young, this would be a good read. Having read and enjoyed *Poetic Justice*, I admit that perhaps Cross/Heilbrun was a bit too harsh on the college age Boomer young, though mostly young men. Here in the *Theban Mysteries*, confining herself mostly to young ladies of a certain level of intellectual rigor, Cross/Heilbrun is perhaps apologizing for damning all the generation... As character sketches, or perhaps archetypes, her *Theban* students and faculty and parents are recognizable. But I would not say there is character growth-- except perhaps in Professor Fansler... The plot twists are weak and you can definitely see the outline of the *Deus ex machina* trapdoor at several points in the plot. Best considered a set piece if you like the setting.

Nick Sanders says

A very literate murder mystery, little bit too wordy to my taste. Lots of verbal circumnavigating, and the solution to the mystery plunges down on a unsuspecting audience like a deus ex machina. Wouldn't recommend it.

Syd says

If you have not read a Kate Fansler novel before, I recommend it to anyone who enjoys their mystery novels with the mystery as only half of the focus of the story. Miss Fansler as a detective also has the distinction of being a feminist sleuth written in an era of budding feminism. Another thing to note is that both Heilbrun and Fansler were/are literature professors, and often but not always in the novels, the discussion of one of the greats or an analysis of a work are core to its telling.

This novel has the newly married, for this is the first novel in which Reed Amherst and she are wed, Kate taking a job at the private girl's high school where she grew up due to a request by an old friend. There are three main narratives in this book. The Vietnam war and its effects on the generation growing up, the analysis and discussion of *Antigone* by Sophocles, and the death itself. As with many mystery books, the death is not discovered until halfway through, so the first half is a set up of the scene.

I read the Fansler novels because I enjoy the literary analysis and the proper and intellectual, self-assured character of Kate, and this is probably my second favorite that I have read so far, my favorite being *In the Last Analysis*, the first in the series. I enjoyed delving into *Antigone* and I enjoyed the backdrop of the school. The mystery left enough clues to help you figure it out, but if you are looking for an amazing reveal and a clever trick of how they did it you will be disappointed. It's a solid mystery, more notable for atmosphere and the uniqueness of the setting than for the mystery itself.

Cassandra says

I enjoyed her first three novels, but I think *Cross* starts to really hit her stride with this one. As with some of the others, the actual 'mystery' doesn't occur until the novel is almost half over, so I would not recommend it to people who do not enjoy setting and character and lengthy conversations about the cultural relevance of Sophocles' *Antigone* to young people during the Vietnam War. For myself, I found it interesting, perhaps a little more as a cultural document than a novel; I like that *Cross* does not find easy answers for any of the generations she represents, and having grown up with parents who saw themselves as 'hippies' (whether or not they actually were), I like to see other sides of the issue and get an emotional sense of what it might have been like to have one's eternal verities attacked.

Rennie says

A combination of a lecture on *Antigone* and a mystery that may not appeal to everyone. In spite of having skimmed some of the longer sections on the analysis of the play, I now know more than I ever did (or necessarily wanted to) about the Greek play but I liked the characters and the mystery well enough to keep

me vested until the end. I will read Poetic Justice as a book half poetry and half mystery will be right up my alley.

Joan says

This literary mystery by Amanda Cross takes Kate Fansler back to her alma mater, The Theban, an exclusive girls' school in New York, to teach a seminar on Antigone.

Of course, there is a mystery to solve--a student's mother who is supposedly frightened to death by the school's two night guards--a pair of dogs.

Quirky characters, a curmudgeonly custodian, and Kate herself live this tale of ancient tragedies, and the human foibles which have not changed since the days of Socrates.

gwen g says

Interesting little mystery about a teacher-turned-detective who goes back to lead a seminar on Antigone at her old New York prep school, sort of in the Jessica Fletcher tradition but with a bit more edge. The mystery was a little flat, and I didn't even remotely care whodunit, but I liked the droll, self-aware protagonist.

The discussion of the Vietnam War in the context of Antigone was also nicely drawn, and helped me gain a bit of perspective of just how divisive the war was even for wealthy, privileged people on opposite sides of the generation gap (and those in the middle, like Fansler herself).

I didn't realize this book was the third in the series when I picked it up; I might go back for the first two.

Pam Walker says

I really like this series by Amanda Cross. Kate Fansler is an intellectual college professor that has been roped into doing a seminar on Antigone for an ailing professor at her alma mater girl's school, the Theban. The mystery is there, but it does not dominate the entire book. The characters are predominant as we see how these characters handle the Vietnam War, when this book was written. Her writing makes you think, and are not the "fluffy" mysteries so predominant today. I have had to resort to online sites to complete my collection as her books are very hard to find. I now have them all and will enjoy reading the rest of her series. I highly recommend her books.

Kate says

My second Amanda Cross experience. The good: Kate Fansler remains a charming heroine, and Cross remains adept at sketching engaging characters and writing witty dialogue. I enjoy spending time in these books and I will read more of them.

The bad: the major mystery is only solvable by guessing, which is more or less what Kate Fansler does. Kate Fansler has what might gently be termed the Jessica Fletcher Advantage: she can get the people she suspects in a room and get them to confess, either by bluffing them, charming them, or threatening them (or doing all three). It was a cheesy ploy on "Murder, She Wrote," and in "The Theban Mysteries" it just stops the story cold. IT'S OVER, EVERYONE GO HOME, KATE FANSLER GUESSED CORRECTLY AND GOT PEOPLE TO CONFESS, OH WELL SO MUCH FOR ALL THE WORK AND INVESTIGATING EVERYONE DID.

So, yes, THAT annoyed me.

The weird: A motif is that "Antigone" is oddly relevant to their times (the height of the Vietnam War). It's clear that the themes they explore are also highly relevant to OUR times. I found that was true of the previous Fansler mystery as well. The more things change etc. etc., I guess.

Judy says

This is the New York entry into the challenge of reading a mystery book set in each of the 50 states and Washington, D.C. I love books with an academic setting and Amanda Cross fits the bill with this fourth in the Kate Fansler series. Kate is an intellectual from the upper class who is a college professor in New York City. While on sabbatical, she agrees to return to her alma mater, Theban, a private girls school on Manhattan's upper East Side, to teach a seminar on Antigone. Set in the 1970s, the plot draws parallels between the draft and the war in Vietnam and Sophocles' play. Lots of fun dialogue and scads of literary references and allusions.

Rin Simpson says

(First reviewed at www.nowiamthirty.journoblog.net 7 February 2011)

I don't know who first warned society not to judge a book by its cover, but he was right. The Theban Mysteries contains in its title the word "mystery", bears the logo of Virago Crime, and pegs the plot synopsis in the blurb on "a dead body in the old school building".

But this isn't what I'd call a murder mystery. In fact, I'm still trying to decide how to classify a book which is equal parts feminism, social commentary, Greek drama and literary analysis.

Certainly I couldn't very easily summarise a plot for you, except to say that there is indeed a school and there is, eventually, a body, and in conclusion we are given a rather unsatisfactory explanation as to how and why it ended up there.

The book is set in 1970s New York and I have to confess that for the most part I was baffled by the socio-political subtext – all Vietnam and educational reform and long-haired Harvard drop outs. And this was before we actually got to the school, where ancient literature, academic debate and the class system were thrown into the mix.

Before too many pages had been turned I already felt as if the book was written for a club of which I was not

a member, and the feeling only grew with every passing chapter. I don't know who or what Roncevaux or Thermopylae are or were, I've never studied the Antigone and my understanding of the ramifications of the Vietnam War are, at best, sketchy.

Perhaps my suspicions should have been raised by the fact that the dedication is written in Greek symbols which, let's face it, few of us can read. But I don't think it was just my lack of classical education or the fact that I was born in the 80s which blunted my enjoyment of the book.

It slipped dangerously close to boring as, after more than 50 pages without a hint of a crime, the students all sat about discussing "the conflict between individual judgement and the conventions of society". Where was this body I was promised?

And I almost gave up on the third night of reading when I picked up at the beginning of chapter five to find Cross had begun including extracts of her characters' poetry.

But then, finally, the puzzle was presented. Not a body, sadly, and not even a very clear puzzle, but it was enough to stop me from giving up on The Theban Mysteries in favour of a well-thumbed Agatha Christie. And the body did eventually appear.

I don't want to be too cutting in my review because there is no doubt that Amanda Cross has skill. She is a clever woman, and she has a certain way with the English language, even if it is a bit formal.

But she doesn't really know how to tell a good story, and if that's what you're after then you will be disappointed with The Theban Mysteries.

It is clever book, and on the rare occasion when I understood it, I enjoyed feeling clever, but it wasn't a relaxing, entertaining read and I wouldn't rush to pick up another title from the author's back catalogue.

Writerlibrarian says

Kate Fansler's mystery are always like intricate lace work. Full of winks at authors and literary work. Here, The Theban is an all girls private school where the senior are studying Antigone for the winter semester. Set in the early 70's, we have a parallel between the Vietnam war, the draft and the generation gap and Sophocles's play about filial loyalty, civil desobedience and a head strong, doomed young woman. What I like about Amanda Cross's novels is the atmosphere, the frills around the plot, the dialogs. This one doesn't disappoint. Made me want to pick your copy of Sophocles I have around.
