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For twenty years I had been perfectly comfortable; for twenty years I had had the window-boxes filled in the spring, the carpets lifted, the awnings put up and the furniture covered with brown linen; for as many summers I had said good-bye to my friends, and, after watching their perspiring hegira, had settled down to a delicious quiet in town, where the mail comes three times a day, and the water supply does not depend on a tank on the roof. And then -- the madness seized me. When I look back over the months I spent at Sunnyside, I wonder that I survived at all. As it is, I show the wear and tear of my harrowing experiences. I have turned very gray -- Liddy reminded me of it, only yesterday, by saying that a little bluing in the rinse-water would make my hair silvery, instead of a yellowish white. I hate to be reminded of unpleasant things and I snapped her off. "No," I said sharply, "I'm not going to use bluing at my time of life, or starch, either."

The Circular Staircase Details

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Author : Mary Roberts Rinehart

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From Reader Review *The Circular Staircase* for online ebook

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

This was such fun! I was immediately taken with the conversational, and somewhat breezy, style. I did not expect that for a book originally published in 1908. I think this is Rinehart's most well known novel, but I will happily look for another and see if it comes close to the same quality/enjoyment.

There are a couple of things which make its age noticeable: the electric company quits sending electricity at midnight, the doctor has a buggy, and the cab is a horse-drawn trap. Despite the age of the novel, it generally holds up well. I have admitted I'm no good at guessing things in a mystery. Though some of the things I found suspicious were, indeed, suspicious, it wasn't until the last 20 pages that I pretty much had things sorted out.

My top rating for the genre is 4-stars. This doesn't quite make that, but is a very strong 3-stars.

Bettie? says

This 1966 edition is not available on GR

We have a word in Swedish that I can use here:

Swedish entry word

lagom [ˈlɑːɡɑm] adv.

inte för mycket och inte för lite, passande, lämpligt

English translation

enough, sufficient, adequate

A lovely read that was just right for me.

Sue says

Fun to read with lots of details and possible suspects. I enjoyed just going with the flow of the story, making a few guesses along the way (one of which turned out to be very true). A bit more sprightly than some of Dame Agatha's, it seemed to me. Not sure what age Aunt Rachel is meant to be (spinster aunt is so open-ended), but she certainly joined the fray.

Ivonne Rovira says

Published in 1908, *The Circular Staircase* won't be what you expect: a hyperventilated Edwardian piece, loaded with implausible plot and purple prose. Our heroine, the middle-aged Rachel Innes, proves caustic, intelligent and quite humorous from the very start. Her well-meaning quarrels with her foolish maid Liddy provide great comic relief, and you won't find Miss Innes making the sort of stupid exercises in derring-do that get modern-day heroines nearly killed in today's mystery novels. Nor will you find Miss Innes melting into Victorian hysterics or melodrama. She's not afraid to hide evidence and thwart the police in her quest for the truth about the murder at her rented summer home. Despite being more than a century old, the novel doesn't feel dated at all, except for the attitudes to other races.

Is the novel perfect? No. As others have pointed out, there are some plot slip-ups. And Miss Innes' attitude toward Thomas the butler, an African-American, while better than average for the day, will strike modern readers as appalling. That said, you'll thoroughly enjoy *The Circular Staircase*.

Susan says

Written in 1908 this is an early mystery, written by Mary Roberts Rinehart (1876- 1958), a prolific American author. The story revolves around Rachel Innes, who rents a house in the country, for her and her two adult wards – Halsey and Gertrude. It soon becomes clear that Rachel (or 'Aunt Ray') is one of those redoubtable women, who tend to be terrible practical and used to dealing with the hysterics of servants. This is useful, as the house she rents from the Armstrong family, named "Sunnyside," is not well named. Rather than offering a pleasant home for the summer, the house is large and isolated; causing her continually resigning servant, Liddy, to be nervous.

Liddy, it turns out, is correct, as the house is full of bumps and noises, with strange figures appearing at the windows and, with the arrival of Halsey and Gertrude, things get no better. Before long there is a murder and a convoluted and confusing tale ensues, involving embezzlement, mysterious events, love stories, melodrama and a sense of impending disaster.

The detective in charge of the case, Mr Jamieson, rightly believes that Miss Innes is keeping things back – indeed she refrains from telling him anything which might incriminate either Halsey or Gertrude; who seem to be involved with virtually every stage of this mystery and to turn up in the most unlikely places, or be linked to, every suspect. However, Mr Jamieson seems happy enough to work alongside Miss Innes, as she attempts to unravel the mystery, resist demands that she leaves the house and free her wards from suspicion.

Obviously this is a very early mystery and so this was undoubtedly more spooky when readers came across it at the time. I must admit that I did not warm to Rachel Innes though, or really feel much interest in the plot. It seemed to career from one event to another and, although an interesting example of an early crime novel, is something I probably would not have persevered with had I not been finishing it for a book group read.

Suki St Charles says

I really enjoyed this book! My edition has a cover that reminds me of the old Nancy Drew mysteries that I loved as a kid (*The Circular Staircase*), and I thought it read like a cross between a Nancy Drew written for adults and a ghost story. Much of the book felt more like a ghost story than a mystery (no supernatural elements, but there was a definite "the-calls-are-coming-from-inside-the-house" vibe). The back cover of this edition shows floor plans of the three floors of the house (no basement), which is something that classic mysteries often had. I love it when books include maps and floor plans; I wish more modern mysteries had them. I have a few Mary Roberts Rinehart books on my shelves that I look forward to revisiting after reading this. :)

Leslie says

Written in 1908, this mystery/thriller wasn't as dated as I had feared (about the same as the Golden Age mysteries of the 30s & 40s). The first person narration worked well & Miss Innes (the narrator) was an engaging, no-nonsense older woman who has no pretensions of being a detective but isn't going to stand for any funny business going on in her house. I did figure out part of the solution but there were enough twists and action that it didn't detract from my enjoyment. Perhaps I was able to solve what I did because Rinehart created a stereotype or two in this novel!

I had been under the impression that I had seen a film of this book, but it turns out that the film I had seen (*The Spiral Staircase*) is a completely different story.

Evgeny says

Rachel Innes, a middle-aged woman decides to spend a summer in a summer house with her niece and nephew. She found what seems to be a perfect place for this, only this perfect place appeared to be haunted the first night Rachel spends in there. In addition to this, a dead body appears in the house some time later. If you think this is bad, mysterious events further down the road make haunting and dead body pale in comparison.

I really like the character of Rachel Innes. She appears to be an intelligent strong woman (especially considering the time when the book was written). On the other hand, her maid Libby is a coward basically providing a comic relief to the plot. Speaking of annoying characters Rachel's niece and nephew mentioned above definitely deserve to be spanked for their behavior regardless of their age.

All in all, the book has enough plot twists and mysteries to keep its reader completely absorbed and lost in the plot. I also need to mention this book is available at Project Gutenberg, and is one of the best mystery novels in there.

Hana says

More twists and turns than a circular staircase in a hall of mirrors. Three and a half stars rounded up because

I really liked the heroine--a lady of a certain age who is as feisty as they come. I kept picturing a slightly younger Maggie Smith in the role. The plot got a bit too convoluted and I didn't care about any of the supporting cast, but it was a fun read and surprisingly contemporary for a hundred-year-old novel.

Abbey says

1908, Rinehart's second novel. Miss Rachel Innes has an eventful "summer vacation" in the country... Deservedly a classic, although the plot is extremely "dated" now. Three stars for plot and most characters, four stars for Miss Rachel and "atmosphere", which is still quite effective; recommended, three-and-one-half stars.

When blue-blooded Philadelphian, late-40ish spinster (in 1908 that was the equivalent of ~60ish now) Rachel Innes and her niece Gertrude and nephew Halsey rent a perfectly enormous isolated country house for the summer they expected/hoped to be pleasantly bored. Ain't gonna happen.

When the son of the owner of the house is found shot dead, lying at the foot of the titular staircase at 3AM one very dark morning and her beloved niece and nephew seem to be far too involved in the tragedy, Miss Rachel (being a forthright sort of woman) needs must sleuth for herself. She's smart, very "sharp", and has a deliciously sly and dry sense of humor. And she's not much like Miss Marple, no matter what sort of impression you have of Rinehart's heroines. She's a fighter, and not so terribly old either, actually. (Marple was ~70 when she began!).

In this first novel Rinehart uses many of the bits and pieces she would hone to perfection over the years, but as a first "suspense novel" this one is awfully good. Yes, the plot is very creaky (ghosts - maybe - and intruders and burglars and kidnaping and murder and an absconding banker with lots of illicit money), and you'll probably guess what is happening almost immediately. The characters are almost all caricatures, not excluding the niece and nephew and Rachel's "difficult" maid Liddy (who's been with her forEVER), but the detective is interesting. And Miss Rachel, although now a definite stereotype, is a glorious creation - it's very enjoyable to follow her through all those "happenings" at that quite peculiar house. It's very obvious that Phoebe Atwood Taylor based one of my favorites, her first sleuth Miss Prudence Whitsby (1930) on Miss Rachel, although IMO Taylor is an even better writer; Asey Mayo was almost a secondary character in that and the second book in that series.

BOTTOM LINE: Don't be turned off by the "sweet cosy thriller" reputation Rinehart's stories have, ignore the creaky plot and extremely old-fashioned goings-on, and just enjoy the fast pace, the setting, the sharply edged humor, and Miss Rachel Innes. She'd be a wonderful friend to have, and she really shines here. **CIRCULAR STAIRCASE** is not as sweet as you might think, although extremely old-fashioned. Recommended.

The last paragraph from the book will give you a nice "taste" of Miss Rachael:

"So we (Rachael and her maid/oldest friend Liddy) sit and talk, and sometimes Liddy threatens to leave and often I discharge her, but we stay together somehow. I am talking of renting a house next year, and Liddy says to be sure there is no ghost. To be perfectly frank, I never really lived until that summer. Time has passed since I began this story. My neighbors are packing up for another summer. Liddy is having the awnings put up, and the window boxes filled. But Liddy or no Liddy, I shall advertise tomorrow for a house in the country, and I don't care if it has a Circular Staircase."

[NOTE: Fantastic Fiction (usually pretty accurate) has a lot of mis-information listed re. this book, don't be fooled/confused. "Miss Cornelia van Gorder" is NOT a character in this novel although I think she was the heroine in the play made from this novel, called The Bat - and a prose version was written/adapted of that play, with a good deal similar to the book, but a large amount of basic plot not at all connected to this story including the lead character. Circular was NOT a part of a series as FF writes, and that staircase was not in "an Elizabethan mansion"... the house in the story is a fairly new, a very well-appointed (for the period) country home built by extremely rich folks]

Ana Rînceanu says

Rachel is a spinster who has had custody of her orphaned Halsey and Gertrude, since they were children. They talk Rachel into renting a house in the country for the summer, where a murder occurs.

This was a nice cozy mystery with plenty of twists and misunderstandings. The relationship between Rachel and her companion, the nervous widow Liddy brings a great deal of comic relief, but I wish the two racist comments would've been taken out of this edition. All in all, I may read more from Rinehart.

Jeanette says

This was a reread and I'm not at all sure when I read it originally. Probably way back, 1980 maybe on the outside! But I do know that I had forgotten most of the guilty, but not Gertrude or Halsey or the duo of country renters.

I give her high, high marks for the pioneering of the plot, contriving manipulators that ended up being the perps, especially this murderer nailed. BUT, but now in 2017? Well the snark hits me differently, I think. I found it far more humorous back in the day. It is still funny in the narrator irreverence but not somehow in the overall tone in which she expresses herself. I'm sorry, I can't nail it down more than that. But this isn't about the time it was composed or even now either. There just something about the situation that I find unsettling to nuance differently?

Regardless, she did a great job in the original forms and the circular plot (more than a staircase- does this one swivel toward duplicity and around again).

This is a good exercise to read something completely NOT in the tone of foul language or PC correct constraint and hubris sensibilities as even the most perverted stories are today. Either which this novel is not. But I have to admit a few sentences did make me cringe. This is highly regarded as her best. Myself, I'm sure I liked some later ones better. This one seemed really, really down to the minute to minute so much more improbable to the timing of pulling off. Long shot to say it mildly.

Samantha says

How had I never heard of the awesomeness that is Mary Roberts Rinehart?? The Circular Staircase was one of the first books I downloaded for free onto my Kindle, and I only grabbed it because the author was compared to Anna Katherine Green whom wrote The Leavenworth Case (a book that I enjoyed when I read

it last year). After reading *The Circular Staircase* I've downloaded every single book by this author that I can get my hands on. I want more!

The Circular Staircase begins with Rachel Innes deciding to spend the summer in the country with her nephew and niece. Little does she know that renting Sunnyside for the summer will mean murder, mystery, and intrigue. For mysterious happenings are going on at Sunnyside and Rachel instantly finds herself a part of them. Rachel is a great main character to be narrating the story because of her dry sense of humor. I found myself laughing out loud at various points in the story thanks to her opinions and musings on everything that was happening. In fact, being able to laugh at the story while still being intrigued by the mystery was one of my favorite parts of the book! I find more and more that I love classic mysteries like this because the authors know how to spin a good tale without lots of blood and gore. Instead Rinehart created a mystery filled with atmosphere and tension as the reader wondered what could possibly be going on at the house. It made for a great read that left me wanting more! My only issue with this book is something that goes more along with the time period that the book was written. The book does have some racial undertones in it but if you take in consideration when it was written then it makes more sense as to why the author included these viewpoint into the story. I didn't care for it but obviously I wasn't born in this time period either. Anyways....

Overall a really, really good read and a book that I enjoyed WAY more than I expected to. Just writing up my thoughts on this book makes me want to try more by her or grab up something by Agatha Christie. If you are ever looking for a gothic mystery novel then I think you should give this one a try. Just don't expect to be surprised by the ending. That part I could see coming from a mile away but luckily it didn't matter because I was enjoying the book too much. Highly recommended especially to mystery fans!

Bottom Line: One of those books that instantly makes you add the author to your must read list!

Disclosure: This was a book I downloaded for free onto my Kindle thru Amazon.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 3.75* of five

The Publisher Says: *The Circular Staircase* is perhaps Mary Roberts Rinehart's most famous story. Wealthy spinster Rachel Innes is persuaded by her niece and nephew Gertrude and Halsey to take a house in the country for the summer. Rachel is unaware that the house holds a secret, and soon unexplained happenings and murder follow.

My Review: Miss Rachel Innes, spinster of circa-1908 Pittsburgh, inheritrix of two children now relatively safely launched into adulthood, and possessor of a large automobile, determines that her town residence needs significant tarding up and, to avoid the attendant chaos and disarray, moves herself, her ladies' maid, and her now-adult charges to Sunnyside, the large and vulgar country home of a local banker. As he, his wife, and his step-daughter (note old-fashioned spelling, it is relevant) are traveling to the almost foreign climes of California, Miss Innes and entourage are left in possession of Sunnyside (a more dramatic misnomer is hard to envision) for the entire summer that renovating Miss Innes's home will require. Perfect!

Not so much.

Miss Innes's maid begins the descent into spookyworld. Noises, disappearing people, mysterious presences, all cause her to think Sunnyside is haunted. Hah, says the commonsensical Miss Innes, there's a rational explanation for it all. And there is. Sadly enough.

When people start dying, as in "no longer sucking air," Miss Innes gets a wee tidge tense. When the homeowner's step-daughter shows up, in a state of complete collapse and her ward's evident amour for the girl makes it impossible to turf her out, Miss Innes begins a logical and determined effort to explain the bizarre happenings at Sunnyside. Amid this tough-enough assignment comes the local banker's reported death from far-off California, the revelation that he embezzled A MILLION DOLLARS!! (a Madoff-sized payday in 1908), and the disappearance of the embezzled bank's head cashier (also the amour of Miss Innes's female ward), and the impossibility of keeping good staff conspire to give good Miss Innes many a sleepless night. In the end, all is well, and the redoubtable Miss Rachel Innes possesses all the facts.

God bless her cotton socks, this lady is just a blast to read about! I like formidable old dowagers. (Lady Grantham aside.) They are so *certain* of their Rightness that it's fun to watch them screw up and fail. This being fiction, the formidable old dowager in question doesn't fail, and manages not to be any more overbearing, opinionated, and adamantine than is absolutely necessary.

Rinehart was a decent writer, and a decent plotter, and so the book offers pleasures in both those measures. It's not going to make the Louise Pennyites abandon the Mistress to read only Rinehart. It's over a century old, and thrills and chills come at a dramatically different pace and price in our time. But frills and furbelows aside, a good figure is a good figure, and this book has a good figure.

Visit your great-grandmother's world for a while. You might surprise yourself with how much you enjoy it.

Carol ?? says

3.5★

I normally struggle with books written this early in the twentieth century, but at the start of this mystery novel I was really engaged. & the character of amateur sleuth Rachel Innes kept me entertained until the end. Brave, feisty & witty. The relationship with her devoted but outspoken servant Liddy was the most entertaining part of the book.

There was no laudanum and Liddy made a terrible fuss when I proposed carbolic acid, just because I had put too much on the cotton once and burned her mouth.

They seem more like sisters than employer & employee for a lot of this novel.

But the story of the mysterious house Rachel rented & it's baffling owners moved too slowly and had too many characters. Rachel In Peril (view spoiler) & this has cause me to raise my rating by half a ★

Joseph says

When I was in junior high school, I worked in a used book store, one of those shady businesses, usually located in a seedy part of town, where a patron could bring in two books and get credit for the purchase of one. The vast majority of our books were brought in by lonely housewives and unmarried women, and they were primarily Harlequin Romances, various Harlequin spin-offs, Dame Barbara Cartland, and the interesting genre called "gothic romances." It was in the gothic romance department that the books of Mary Roberts Rinehart were shelved, and being the kind of boy that wouldn't read anything deemed for a girl, I never delved into one of Mrs Rinehart's books, until I found a slew of them offered for free for Kindle.

I supposed they're "gothic" enough, if that term means spooky houses and mystery and murder, but the romance portion is rather skimpy. Had I known that, I would have dived into these books, at least this one, years ago. In the *Circular Staircase*, the best-selling novel that brought Mrs Rinehart fame and at least a little bit of fortune, the reader will definitely encounter each of those things, in a tale told with humor and forthrightness by the narrator, Aunt Rachel Innes.

I don't know about you, dear reader of this review, but I generally have some sort of stock picture in my mind of the characters in the books I read. Having recently seen the Hildegard Withers movies, adapted from the novels by Stuart Palmer and starring Edna May Oliver, I got caught up in the idea of Ms Oliver as the perfect representation of Aunt Rachel. Although Aunt Rachel is described as elderly, Ms Oliver always looked 20 years older than she was.

Unfortunately, I also got it stuck in my head that Aunt Rachel's niece, Gertrude, aged 24, was Sharon Tate with her bouffanty 1960s hair-do.

The novel was written in 1908, so you can just imagine the cognitive dissonance going on in my mind. Edwardian aunt with mod, Austin Powers inspired niece. Yi.

Anyway, the plot of this novel deals with Aunt Rachel, Gertrude, and Gertrude's brother Halsey (how's that for a WASP-y name?) taking up residence for the summer in a house that has been let by the wife of a local banker, who has gone out west with his family for the time being. From the very first night, there are apparitions and soon murder, and Halsey disappears and Gertrude seems suspicious, all the while driving Aunt Rachel and her personal assistant, Liddy, into various paroxysms. Many of the major players are cast into suspicion at one point or another, and then there's the strange case of a lady and her child and why they are important to the mystery at hand. Hmm.

Overall, this was fun to read. The dialog is snappy, the scenes are described vividly, and the characters fairly well-rounded for a book of this sort. There is a problem, however, with the depiction of black Americans in this book. The term "darky" is used, and the one prominent black character is given to such a parody of black speech as to be borderline insulting. I suppose that any book from this period is not going to be all that enlightened, and the few black characters are not gross exaggerations, either. Still, reading this with the Baltimore riots going on has shone a bright light on the marginalization of blacks even in popular American literature. I don't think the book is unreadable because of it, though, and would encourage the prospective reader to see for himself/herself.

Unlike a lot of mysteries, the case is not solved through pulling clues from thin air. Ms Rinehart ties things together neatly but by drawing the lines closer and closer together until it all comes together and makes sense. I think most readers will enjoy this light, yet entertaining novel.

Oh, and for the part of Liddy, Aunt Rachel's maid and sparring partner? Who did I have in mind for her? Why, Elsa Lanchester, of course! After all, she was in a movie called *The Spiral Staircase*, although it was a different plot entirely.

Hmm, no, not as the Bride of Frankenstein.

No, just too old when she was in *Murder By Death*.

Still not right with that look from *Mary Poppins*.

Ah! There she is, as she was in *The Bishop's Wife*. A little too young, perhaps, but that's her.

Just perfect.

Carmine says

Voci nel buio

L'aspetto più interessante è la sensibilità dell'autrice nel narrare le sottigliezze dei rapporti interpersonali che vengono a costruirsi in un piccolo microcosmo familiare.

L'impianto narrativo, invece, accusa un pochettino il passare del tempo: troppe confessioni parziali ed esposte piuttosto alla carlona; momenti improbabili in cui l'autoconservazione della protagonista si riduce ai minimi termini; riproposizioni pedissequa delle dinamiche da stampo "home invasion".

Buono lo scioglimento finale.

John says

The novel that made Mary Roberts Rinehart famous, and a tremendous gothic romp -- a sort of updated North American version of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, in which anything in the night that doesn't go bump isn't earning its keep.

Wealthy spinstress Rachel Innes, her city house under reconstruction, takes a six-month lease on the country mansion Sunnyside from its owners, banker Paul Armstrong and his wife. Soon "Aunt Ray" is joined by her

adult nephew Halsey and her niece Gertrude -- plus, briefly, Gertrude's fiance John Bailey. Other members of the household come and go -- usually go, because of them nighttime bumps -- but always at Aunt Ray's side is her "personal maid" Liddy, who's been with her for decades.

After a night or two of bumps, there's the sound of a shot and the corpse is discovered in the billiardroom of Paul Armstrong's son Arnold. It seems he's been shot from above -- from, in fact, the circular staircase that runs up that wing of the house. The cops in the form of Inspector Jamieson and his colleagues arrive like unto wasps and a jampot. Meanwhile, out West, it's reported that Paul Armstrong has died of some lurgy or another; closer to home, it emerges that his bank has been looted. His daughter Louise arrives feverish and throws herself on the mercies of the Innes family. We discover that John Bailey was the cashier at Paul Armstrong's bank. There are further nocturnal bumpings and knockings, and it's clear someone is trying to break into the house for nefarious purposes . . .

There's lots, lots more. The illegal exhumation -- which of course Aunt Ray attends -- is but one of several highlights.

The tale is narrated by Aunt Ray, who's the kind of sharp-witted, entrancing maiden aunt you've always wished you had. (Until last year I had one a little like this, albeit far less caustic, and I'm still getting over losing her.) Ray's observations about life in general and those around her in particular are often extremely funny; that deprecating wit, however, falls flat when -- and I'm sure Rinehart thought she was being breezy and charming here -- its spotlight turns on one of the coloured characters. Here's a sample:

As for Thomas and his forebodings, it was always my belief that a negro is one part thief, one part pigment, and the rest superstition.

Oh, Vomit City. I'm usually the first to maintain that we shouldn't judge authors by the era in which they lived (*The Circular Staircase* was published in 1908), but here I decline to accept that the excuse stands: Rinehart shows herself in enough other areas to be an intelligent, progressive thinker that I don't think she can be let off the hook here. I think she was lazily according with the popular numbnuts sentiment of her day just to get a quick sneer. To be fair, another black character enters the story later and, despite being introduced as a "smart darky" who "with his mouth shut and his shirt-front covered, you couldn't see him a yard off in the dark", proves to be as resourceful and intelligent as anyone else in the cast.

If it weren't for those few racist paragraphs, I'd have this book at four stars and maybe even groping for five. That aside, it's enormously readable (don't be put off by the 1908 date; this reads very freshly) and has a charming narrator, with several of the supporting cast being likewise delightfully portrayed. I have more of Rinehart's work on my tablet, and I can't imagine, after this introduction, that it'll be long before I try another.

Hannah says

An enjoyable mystery that kept me guessing throughout. The writing style, narrated by spinster Rachel Innes, was yet another drastic difference for me from Rinehart's other works I have read (*K.* and *When a Man Marries*) was distinctly humorous in what could have been an extremely spooky horror story in parts. It has heavy Gothic overtones but Rachel laughs off one after the other and stubbornly stays until the mystery

is solved.

This would have been five stars for me, but I docked one for heavy and nasty racist comments in three or four spots. Evidently Miss Rachel's own race was so excellent, going around murdering and lying and having affairs and so on, eh?

Content: minor swears; racism

For the faint of heart: murders and small locked spaces

Sara says

I began this as an audio book but (fortunately) made the decision to switch to hard copy about halfway through. As Mary Roberts Rinehart is considered one of the matriarch's of the modern mystery novel I think it would be only fair to get some new recordings done of her books. In addition to just plain old poor audio quality the narrator, who sounds a great deal like the vaguely insane person who narrated the Amelia Peabody mysteries I tried a few months ago, wasn't doing it for me. She's got the right tone and inflection for the main character, spinster aunt Rachel Innes, but she's just not savvy enough to handle the other characters and the story was just plodding on and on.

Once I switched to reading I started getting the perfectly proper witticisms and the tension Rinehart had clearly been trying to ramp up registered much more clearly.

It is 1908 and Aunt Rachel has allowed herself to be talked into renting a grand house in the country where she and her niece and nephew (who she raised following the death of her brother) will spend the summer. Virtually from the moment they arrive the house is besieged by mysterious noises in the night, unexplained intruders and hysterical servants all of whom are convinced the house is haunted. When things culminate in a violent murder, her nephew abruptly disappears and the police are no help so Rachel takes it upon herself to clear things up.

Rinehart is most well known for her novel *The Bat* and for making popular the "if I had but known then what I know now" and "the butler did" style of mystery. She's often thought of as the American Agatha Christie based on the intricacy of her stories and the depth of her characters.

I didn't quite get all that from this book but it was certainly entertaining. Given the time period in which it was written and set its rife with sexism, classicism, and our old friend blatant racism. A black servant is frequently referred to as a "darkie" and there are several asides calling into question the man's intelligence and character based entirely on his race. Women faint at the drop of a hat and there's rarely a chapter where they aren't being ordered about or "protected" or chuckled at because they're just silly women who don't have the mental faculties to solve crimes. Any interaction the main characters have with people in a different tax bracket definitely have an air of benevolent tolerance for these poor, uneducated garbage people who will do anything for a buck.

But if you can get around that this really is a pretty clever story that honestly made the hairs on the back of my neck go up on more than one occasion.

My biggest issue with the structure is, ironically, the device Ms. Rinehart is most well known for. Essentially the entire mystery hinges on information certain people already have, that other people are aware they have,

that they are unable to give because of....well....reasons.

These reasons are inevitably tied to a misguided sense of honor that just doesn't translate to today. A guy has been murdered but the motivation can't be revealed because it might tarnish someone's good name. A fortune has been embezzled and hundreds of people have lost all their savings but the guy who knows who did can't reveal what's happening because he promised not to and gentlemen always keep their promises. So the "detecting" here isn't so much traditional working out who did it as it is waiting until the people with the relevant information are sure society can handle the truth.

I had some issues with the deeply dividing line between the classes in this world as well. Rachel's a pretty cool cucumber with an appropriately dry wit and she's damn smart. Unfortunately her niece and nephew who are clearly intended to be seen as simply spiffy "modern" young people of the best character instead come off to this reader as disaffected layabouts who don't need jobs because they've inherited all their money with the attitudes of spoiled, bored rich kids. The biggest issues they face are the possibilities of their love affairs not working out because they're being associated with scandalous police goings on.

That said this is a fun, quicky, and witty way to pass the time. Just pass it with a grain of salt.
