

A True Detective:  
A Book Report on *The Confession of Brother Haluin*

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Author's Note

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*The Confession of Brother Haluin* by Ellis Peters is from a series of detective novels centering on the adventures of Brother Cadfael, a 12<sup>th</sup> century English monk. Despite being tied to his abbey in the small village of Shrewsbury, Cadfael manages to find himself constantly embroiled in mysterious deaths and disappearances. In this, the fifteenth book of the series, Cadfael leaves the abbey to accompany a fellow monk, Broth Haluin, on a pilgrimage to ask for forgiveness for the sin the led him into religious service eighteen years earlier. It is on this journey that Cadfael stumbles across the murder of a servant and the long-kept secrets of a noble family. All of this adds up to a very classic detective novel: a complicated, high society murder, a curious savant ready to solve the case, and attention-grabbing cliffhangers. The story also incorporates elements of historical fiction as well as excellent writing.

The most important aspect of the novel that marks it as a detective story is that it follows Ronald Knox's main rule for detective fiction as laid out in his "ten commandments of detective fiction." It has "as its main interest the unraveling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end" ("Ronald Knox"). The sin that sets the story in motion happens eighteen years in the past, when Haluin fell in love with and impregnated a young woman, Bertrade, who, he believes, then subsequently died from an attempted abortion. The story, of course, turns out to be much more complicated than either Brother realizes when they set out from the abbey; Bertrade is actually alive and she and Haluin have a daughter, Helisende. There is also a star-crossed love interest for Bertrade, a nefarious matriarch, and, finally, the murder of a servant who threatens to reveal all of the family's secrets. In short, everything a detective novel needs to maintain suspense and interest.

The man who ties all these threads together is Cadfael, a classic example of a non-professional detective. He's a monk, but he spent many decades of his life as a Crusader, and so, in addition to his innate curious spirit, is knowledgeable about a wide variety of subjects and is very adept at reading people. When the adoptive parents of Helisende are attempting to hide her forbidden love from her prospective groom, Cadfael easily sees through them: "The look they exchanged Cadfael could read as if he had the words ringing in his ears. He had been given clues enough to make the reading easy" (Peters, 1988, p. 116). It is these preternatural powers of observation that allow him to sort his way through the family secrets that no one else has managed to see through. The reader is told that his abilities derive from his time out in the world and set him apart from his other brothers. Cadfael says of his traveling companion, "once enlightened, Haluin may well prove the stuff of which saints are made. As for me, I am an unregenerate man" (Peters, p. 142). Like Father Brown, G.K. Chesterton's archetypal Catholic detective, Cadfael is an unassuming man of the cloth with a profound insight into human nature and its attendant evils.

His observational skills also extend to the physical world, where he is able to ferret out important clues about the circumstances surrounding the murder of Edgytha. When Lord Audemar's men are trying to figure out whether Edgytha was able to deliver her message, it is Cadfael that figures out when she was killed: "'There's snow under her,' said Cadfael. The shrunken shape of her was dark and moist where contact had been close enough for her body's lingering warmth to melt the flakes, but all round the rim where the folds of her clothing had lain only lightly, a worn border of lace remained. 'It was after the snow began that she fell. She was on her way home'" (Peters, 1988, p. 158). Similarly, he alone is able to see the familial relationship between Helisende, Bertrade, and Haluin before anyone else. He sees them

together and “all this came seething through his mind in the instant of revelation, the brief moment before Helisende herself emerged from the shadows” (Peters, p. 157).

Another detective story trope used by Cadfael novels is chapter-ending cliffhangers. Every chapter in *The Confession of Brother Haluin* ends with a surprise, frequently with the sudden appearance of an unexpected character. One of the best is the revelation that Bertrade is still alive. The chapter ends with Haluin encountering Sister Benedicta in the nunnery where the Brothers are resting for the night and the revelation that she is his beloved Bertrade: “In wonder and joy and pain, and all in extremes, as one driven and wracked by religious ecstasy: ‘Bertrade!’ whispered Brother Haluin” (Peters, 1988, p. 155). Another startling and dramatic ending occurs when Roscelin returns to claim Helisende: “The cold of the night blew in with him, and all the torches guttered and smoked, as Cenred, erupting out of the solar, was halted as abruptly on the threshold of the hall by his son’s fiery glare. ‘What is this Edred tells me of you?’ demanded Roscelin. ‘What have you done behind my back?’” (Peters, p. 129). This style of writing pulls the novel forward and contributes to the suspense and fast pacing of detective novels.

There is also an element of historical fiction in the Brother Cadfael series. The novels take place in 12<sup>th</sup> century England in the time known as The Anarchy, during which King Stephen and Empress Matilda (known as Maud in the books) fought for the throne. Their battle plays out in the background of the Cadfael series and the fictional characters in the novel occasionally play a role in the war. Cadfael’s friend Hugh “was King Stephen’s man, and held the shire for him loyally enough” (Peters, 1988, p. 5), and Shrewsbury has been under various rule during “the five years King Stephen and his cousin, the Empress Maud, had fought for the throne of England” while “fortune had swung between them like a pendulum many times, presenting the

cup of victory to each in erratic turn” (Peters, p. 2). *The Confession of Brother Haluin* even references a specific siege in The Anarchy where Matilda was able to escape from Oxford castle on a snowy night. The novel opens with Hugh coming to relate news of the siege to Cadfael, who is credulous that “the empress is escaped out of Oxford . . . with the king’s army all around her, and stores down to starvation level in the castle” (Peters, p. 6). There are other books in the series, including *One Corpse Too Many* and *Brother Cadfael’s Penance*, in which Cadfael and Hugh play a larger role in Stephen and Matilda’s battle.

A notable aspect of the Brother Cadfael mysteries that sets them apart from some other detective fiction is the quality of the writing. In addition to be well-plotted, there are also many well-written passages that elevate the novel above a simple whodunit. One of the best descriptions is of Haluin’s redemptive night of penance:

“the altar lamp made an eye of brightness in the gloom, at least ruddy like fire if it gave no warmth. The silence carried hour by hour, like an infinitesimal ripple vibrating through it, the gradual heave of Haluin’s breathing and the constant whisper of his moving lips, felt in the blood and bowels rather than audible with the ear . . . The tension and passion kept him erect and oblivious to pain, though pain took fast hold of him before midnight, and never left him until his rapture and his ordeal ended together with the coming of light” (Peters, 1988, 118).

It is passages like these that set apart the Cadfael books from other popular mystery series.

Overall, *The Confession of Brother Haluin*, and the Cadfael series in general, are very good examples of the detective genre. Cadfael himself is a classic detective figure: intelligent,

wise, extremely adept at reading people, and possessed of a mysterious, dangerous past. Above all, he is curious. Even from his position as a monk, he is able to solve murders and involve himself in the great political and social issues of his day. This, in addition to the intricate, careful plotting and excellent writing combine to make the Brother Cadfael books a perfect read for those who love the detective fiction genre.

## References

Peters, Ellis. (1988). *The confession of brother haluin*. New York, NY: Warner Books.

“Ronald Knows: the ten commandments of detective fiction.” *Gotham Writers Workshop*.  
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