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Kate lives on the English side of the Welsh Marches with her husband and her Border terrier.

*Also by Kate Charles*

The Snares of Death  
Appointed to Die  
A Dead Man Out of Mind  
Evil Angels Among Them  
Unruly Passions  
Strange Children  
Cruel Habitations  
Evil Intent  
Secret Sins  
Deep Waters  
False Tongues

A DRINK OF  
DEADLY  
WINE

KATE CHARLES



Marylebone House

First published in Great Britain in 1991 by Headline Book Publishing

This edition published in 2015

Marylebone House  
36 Causton Street  
London SW1P 4ST  
[www.marylebonehousebooks.co.uk](http://www.marylebonehousebooks.co.uk)

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-910674-07-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-910674-08-6

Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Manufacture managed by Jellyfish

First printed in Great Britain by CPI

Subsequently digitally printed in Great Britain

eBook by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

For Simon

*Thou hast shewed thy people heavy things: thou hast given us a drink of  
deadly wine.*

*Psalm 60.3*

## The Book of Psalms mysteries: looking back, looking forward

It's difficult for me to believe, but it has been 25 years since I began writing *A Drink of Deadly Wine*, the first novel in what would become 'The Book of Psalms mysteries'. Contrary to what readers may believe, in my experience writers of fiction don't very often reread their own books – they are too focused on the future to have time for the past, too concerned with what comes next to worry about what has been. So the republication of this series of novels, 25 years on, has provided me with a rare opportunity to revisit a world I once inhabited totally, the world of the Church of England in the early 1990s.

In so many ways, the early 1990s belong to a long-gone past. Young readers today might find that past laughable, if not totally incomprehensible. Those years provide the context of the books: my characters live in a world which is, first and foremost, uncontrolled by technology. There are no mobile phones, and certainly no smartphones; phones are mostly attached to walls. No one listens to music on anything other than a radio or a record player, unless they're very modern and have adopted CDs. Televisions are large and bulky things. Home computers are non-existent, as are Kindles and other e-readers – not to mention iPads. People carry address books and use telephone directories. If they need information, they go to a library, and if they want to travel to somewhere unfamiliar, they look at a map.

Other differences are cultural, reminding us of how many things have changed in our society. In those books, supermarkets closed their doors by 5 or 6 p.m., and were never open on a Sunday. Pub licensing hours were strictly regulated. People smoked in pubs, restaurants and workplaces. Fox hunting was pretty much unquestioned. Laura Ashley represented the height of fashion. And 'British Rail tea' was unfailingly undrinkable.

And yet . . .

And yet, when moving into the sphere of the Church of England which these books so firmly inhabit, not so much has changed.

Yes, I can report with a joyous and thankful heart that women are now acceptable as priests in much if (sadly) not all of the Church, and

by the time these new editions are published, women bishops will probably already be consecrated, or at least appointed. *Deo gratias*.

But so much remains the same, and not in a good way. Power struggles, judgemental attitudes, ‘them’ and ‘us’, gossip – it was true then, and I still see these things going on in parishes everywhere. It is the stuff of which mystery novels are made: the base human nature which puts self above others, and which manifests itself at its worst in the Church.

People often ask me why there are so many crime novels set in the Church, and this, I believe, is at the heart of it. The Church is the perfect setting for a crime novel precisely because human nature at its ugliest is most evident set against the ideal which the Church represents. And because church people are usually aware that a higher standard of behaviour is expected of them, when they are unable to live up to the ideal they have a better reason for concealment. Concealment leads to secrets, and secrets provide the perfect scenario for the crime novelist.

So when I embarked upon the series 25 years ago, I was but following in the steps of a long line of writers such as G. K. Chesterton, C. A. Alington, Victor L. Whitechurch, Ellis Peters and P. D. James, and writing in a tradition which would grow to include D. M. Greenwood, Phil Rickman, Andrew Taylor and James Runcie, among so many others.\*

Why, though, the ‘Book of Psalms’?

As a member of a parish choir for many years, I have had the weekly privilege of singing the psalms, and have found them a source of incomparable richness. Especially when sung to Anglican chant, in the BCP Coverdale translation, they are replete with every human emotion, from sublime joy to utmost despair. In spite of – or perhaps even because of – their archaic language, they have a timeless resonance which speaks to me on so many levels. I have come to love them more than practically anything else in the liturgy; this series aside, there are only two of my subsequent novels which don’t also bear titles from the psalms.

When I began the first book, the title was a part of it from the beginning (Psalm 60.3), inextricably bound up with what I wanted

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\* For further information on the history and tradition of clerical crime fiction, see my feature article/cover story ‘The Chief Suspect? Chesterton’ in the *Church Times*, Issue 7588, 22 August 2008.

to say about the characters, and about their relationships to each other and to the Church. I'm not sure why I set myself the task of finding an appropriate psalm verse as an epigraph for each chapter, but that became a challenge I enjoyed as the series progressed, and I now think it is one of the things about the series which has caused it to endure.

Another factor contributing to the longevity of these books is the fact that they are not in any way typical crime novels: yes, there are crimes in each of them, but the books are not *about* the crimes. The books are at heart about *people*, with the crimes providing a particularly potent way to set events in motion and put the characters under pressure, allowing me to explore their motivations and their actions. For this reason I find the American term 'mystery', with its additional theological overtones, to be more appropriate than the preferred British usage of 'crime novel'.

In my novels I have attempted to create and depict a consistent world, with characters who move in and out of story lines and sometimes reappear in unexpected places – much in the tradition of my favourite novelist, Barbara Pym. This presents a challenge for a writer who must also be concerned with plot: one of the unspoken rules for writing a series of crime novels is that they should be able to be read in any order, so that something in one novel does not give away the solution to a crime in another. This can be tricky with a cast of on-going characters, but I do believe that people come to know and care about those characters.

For whatever reason, these books continue to be popular with readers. Scarcely a week passes when I don't receive at least one email from someone who has just discovered them, or loved them for a very long time and is desperate for another. I'm hoping that these new editions will bring 'The Book of Psalms mysteries' to a whole new, untapped, group of readers who will find something about them to enjoy.



## *A Drink of Deadly Wine*, revisited

The outing of a priest with a hidden gay past: what could be more up to date, more snatched fresh from today's headlines? And yet this is the issue at the very heart of *A Drink of Deadly Wine*, written 25 years ago.

As I said in the introduction to the series, there are some things in the Church of England that have not changed through the passing years, and if anything the issue of sexuality (generally used as a euphemism for homosexuality, or LGBT) has gained increasing prominence since then. When I wrote *A Drink of Deadly Wine*, I prophesied that sexuality was the ticking time-bomb that would divide and define the Church in the twenty-first century, and unfortunately I have been proven right. People are more open in discussing the issue than they were back then, but the only change in church policy has been in a retrograde direction, to make official the ridiculous hypocrisy which punishes those courageous enough to enter into committed relationships and encourages yet more hypocrisy and downright dishonesty.

So this is a book with more than a little to say to the Church of today, wrapped in a story. It enters the lives of a group of characters in a spiky London church, and we soon find that they have relationships with and feelings for each other which are far from straightforward.

For me, the book started with the characters, and the glimmer of an idea for the novel I'd always wanted to write. Then came a New Year's resolution, and I began on the first of January. The prologue seemed to write itself somehow, then for a few weeks I groped my way through the first chapters, slowly finding my voice. An amateur detective, just an ordinary chap, doing a favour for a friend, without much idea of how to go about it . . .

Suddenly, around mid-February I found myself utterly gripped, and I couldn't stop writing. I needed to know what happened, and the only way to find out was to keep writing. I finished it on Easter Day, 15 April, in floods of tears.

When I'd started, apart from the main characters and the High Church setting and the letter which set everything in motion, the only thing I knew was that I wanted to write a book about choices

and consequences: I wanted to say that through our lives we must make choices, whether we want to or not, and then we must live out the consequences of those choices. In the course of the writing, some of the choices that faced my characters were not ones I'd envisioned or planned, nor were the consequences. That partially explains the floods of tears. And I discovered that I was also writing about several other major themes. About different types of love, and how they can co-exist. About the relationship of the past to the present, and how no one ever truly escapes from his or her past.

And I knew that when I wrote 'The End', it was by no means the end of the story. The characters had become a part of me; I needed to know what they were going to do next. I couldn't wait to start the sequel.

But *A Drink of Deadly Wine* was my first-born child. It will always hold a very special place in my heart.

*Kate Charles*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone at Marylebone House, especially editor Alison Barr, for giving this book a new lease of life. Retrospectively, I offer my deep gratitude to my incomparable editor, the late Sara Ann Freed of Mysterious Press/Warner Books. I would also like to thank MJO; my debt to him is beyond words.

## Author's note

I have taken a few ecclesiastical liberties for which I hope I will be forgiven. St Anne's Church, Kensington Gardens, does not exist, nor does St Dunstan's Church, Brighton. I have also elevated two towns to cathedral cities for reasons of plot: Selby Abbey exists, of course, but is not a cathedral, and likewise Plymouth has been elevated.

## Dramatis personae

Father Gabriel Neville	Vicar of St Anne's, Kensington Gardens
Emily Neville	His wife
Sebastian and Viola Neville	Their twin children, age 6
Tony Kent	Head Server
Daphne Elford	Sacristan
Miles Taylor	Organist
Wing Commander Cyril Fitzjames	Churchwarden
Mavis Conwell	Churchwarden
Percy 'Venerable' Bead	Server
Johnnie and Chris	Servers
Lady Constance Oliver	Parishioner and benefactor
Roger and Julia Dawson	Parishioners
Nick, Benedict, Teresa, Francis, Bridget and Clare Dawson	Their children
Cecily and Arthur Framlingham	Parishioners
Mary Hughes	Parishioner
Beryl Ball	Parishioner
David Middleton-Brown	A solicitor in Norwich, friend of Daphne Elford
Lucy Kingsley	An artist, best friend of Emily Neville
Norman Newsome	Precentor of Plymouth Cathedral
Peter Maitland	An enigma
Sister Mary Grace	A nun
Mildred Somers	Retired secretary to the Provost of Selby Cathedral
Graham Crawford	A solicitor in Brighton, friend of David Middleton-Brown



## PROLOGUE

*Keep me from the snare that they have laid for me: and from the traps of the wicked doers.*

*Psalm 141.10*

Emily put her head around the study door. ‘The children are ready, darling. Shall we go?’

With an effort, Father Gabriel Neville smiled at his wife. ‘You and the children go on ahead. I want to have a last look at my sermon – people will be expecting something special today!’

‘And I’m sure you won’t disappoint them. See you in a bit, then.’

As the door closed behind her, the smile faded from Gabriel’s face, and he stared unseeing at the piece of paper in his hands. An ordinary piece of paper, with no distinguishing marks. He could throw it on the fire and get on with his life, with his career. But the words that were written on that paper were already incised on his heart, and the threat behind them would not go away.

Ugly words, words full of hate, and malice, and hurt. His carefully ordered world . . .

A shaft of morning sunlight broke through the study window, and his desk was momentarily dappled with pools of colour from the inset pane of stained glass. Cool blue lapped his sermon notes, while a finger of red touched the smooth rock paperweight. The past . . . he would not allow himself to think of the past. Gabriel shuddered and reached convulsively for the silver-framed photo of Emily and the children. A beautiful family – any man would be proud. Lovely Emily, with her glossy dark hair and her glowing brown eyes. Viola and Sebastian, the twins. People often stopped Emily on the street, astonished by their beauty. Beauty in duplicate it was, with their perfect heart-shaped faces, Emily’s shining dark hair and his sapphire-blue eyes. He gazed gratefully at them. The past, threatening to crowd in on him, was held at bay by their smiling faces. The present, yes, the present was all that mattered – that, and the future.

He looked around the study as he contemplated his future. When the time came, he would be sorry to leave this place; of all the rooms

in the vicarage, this was his favourite, his sanctuary. All was in order: his books, lined up alphabetically on the oak shelves; the mantelpiece with its carefully arranged treasures; the beautiful Queen Anne desk, polished to a mellow sheen and clear of all save the sermon notes and the photo; the Persian carpet, its colours still rich and vibrant despite its great age. It was all of a wholeness, just like his life.

And now this. Gabriel opened the top drawer of his desk and thrust the folded paper in, then hesitated. No one else should be opening his desk drawer – the children knew they were not to enter his study, and the daily would never look inside his desk when she polished it, but it didn't do to take chances. He fiddled with a bit of wood, and a secret drawer slid silently out. The paper thus safely dealt with, Father Gabriel Neville prepared himself to go to church.

# Part 1

