

THE BIG BOW MYSTERY



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A huge cast of characters knock against each other trying to solve the mystery behind the strange death of Oliver Constance, one of the most prolific orators of his day. Zangwill has composed a thoughtful satire of Victorian England and London's picturesque Bow district.

The Big Bow Mystery Details

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Author : Israel Zangwill

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From Reader Review The Big Bow Mystery for online ebook

Tweety says

Well, talk about surprises! the ending left a me with a creepy feeling. All in all, a good tale.

Caroline says

Very interesting and amusing early mystery. The stars are for the writing, not the plot. The plot purports to be the point (as the 'first' locked room mystery) but it is actually beside the point for today's reader. Instead, I enjoyed Zangwill's witty approach to satirizing the London of his day. Professional jealousy, exaggerated characters, do-gooders, the justice system, family life, crackpots...lots of wordplay and meticulous undercutting of common tropes make for lots of fun.

But there are also interwoven, if lightweight, commentaries on the labor movement of his day, the role of the benefactor, and on the Aesthetic movement as it relates to 'real life.' A good summer read.

The work first ran serially in a newspaper, and Zangwill later wrote a 'mendacious' letter to be published in the paper to the effect that when he started he didn't know how it would be solved. But he thanked his readers for their suggestions during the duration of his run, as they had helped him craft the ending. Rot, he says in a later introduction, of course in a story like this you have to know how it works from the outset.

Also, from Zangwill's introduction to the version available at Project Gutenberg:

The Indispensable condition of a good mystery is that it should be able and unable to be solved by the reader, and that the writer's solution should satisfy....

I like that 'able and unable'.

Well, the first works here, but for us I'm not sure the second(satisfying solution) is true. At any rate, a few samples of the fun:

Mr. Constant wished to be woke three-quarters of an hour earlier than usual...having to speak at an early meeting of discontented tram-men...Why Arthur Constant, B A--white-handed and white-shirted, and gentleman to the very purse of him--should concern himself with tram-men, when fortune had confined his necessary relations with drivers to cabmen at the least, Mrs. Drabdump [his landlady] could not quite make out. He probably aspired to represent Bow in Parliament, but then it would surely have been wiser to lodge with a landlady who possessed a vote by having a husband alive. [Zangwill apparently being convinced that most wives rule the roost].

In a letter from the deceased upper class do-gooder to a friend on his reading of Schopenhauer:

I have been making his [Schopenhauer's] acquaintance lately. He is an agreeable rattle of a pessimist...What shall one man's life--a million men's lives--avail against the corruption, the vulgarity and the squalor of civilization? Sometimes I feel like a farthing rushlight in the Hall of Eblis. Selfishness is so long and life so short. And the worst of it is that everybody is so beastly contented. The poor no more desire comfort than the rich culture...The real crusted old Tories are the paupers in the Workhouse. The Radical working men are jealous of their own leaders, and the leaders of one another. Schopenhauer must have organized a labor party in his salad days.

...

"Yes, but what will become of the Beautiful?" said Denzil Cantercot [the Poet].

"Hange the Beautiful!" said Peter Crawl [the very realist cobbler], as if he were on the committee of the Academy. "Give me the True."

Denzil did nothing of the sort. He didn't happen to have it about him.

He [Crawl] prided himself on having no fads. Few men are without some foible or hobby; Crawl felt almost lonely at times in his superiority. He was a Vegetarian, a Secularist, a Blue Ribbonite, A Republican, and an Anti-Tobacconist. Meat was a fad. Drink was a fad. Religion was a fad. Monarchy was a fad. Tobacco was a fad. ...Crawl knew his Bible better than most ministers, and always carried a minutely-printed copy in his pocket, dogs-eared to mark contradictions in the text....Cock-fighting affords its votaries no acuter pleasure than Crawl derived from setting two texts by the ears....

Robyn says

Free. | Only okay, but probably quite good for readers of the time | I haven't read a 19th century mystery in awhile, so it took some time to get into the rhythm of the language. Quite a few sections were really dull, as the author seemed to abandon his story for cheeky asides or moralizing. And since I've read dozens of more recent locked room murders, the solution was unsurprising to me. All that said, it was an interesting read and I enjoy seeing the history of the genre, as it were, especially for free.

Mandy says

Probably more like 1.5 stars.

This little book was only 160 pages long. Yet it took me an age to read, it seems.

This book was written in the 1890s and serialised in a newspaper. If that sounds very like Charles Dickens, this book reads very like a Dickens' novel. But it lacks the warmth of Dickens, indeed the author, Israel Zangwill, seems to make a mockery of the society in which he lived.

This is the story of the murder of Arthur Constant, who is found dead in a locked room with his throat cut. This book is very wordy and really, it has to be said, at times boring because of this. There are hardly any paragraph breaks and the reading experience suffers because of this, I think.

The story never really engaged me at all, and from the beginning I was able to guess who the killer was, mostly because of the introduction by the author himself, in which he said that if you eliminated everyone else, there was only one person that it could be.

The book is well-written, and I could imagine that reading it in serialised form would have made it more exciting, but ultimately I wasn't satisfied with either the book or any character in it.

Andrew says

This was my first brush with "gaslight" crime mystery or so the introduction describes itself - which is rather interesting since it lists a large number of titles from my "tales of mystery and the supernatural" collection but I won't quibble.

I will say that the story is engaging and easier to read than I anticipated. Now let me explain.

The first consideration was the language - now having read a few books from this era was I not expecting the language to be so recognisable or as down to earth. I guess too authors want for authenticity and at times over do the dialect and pronunciations to the point you have to re-read some sentences to decipher what they are trying to say (or is that me). But not in the case of this story - now I am assuming that the edition I am reading has not been re-edited to reflect its modern printing. So yes this made the book easy to connect with and get in.

And this leads on to my second point (or possibly as a result of it?). The fact that the original was serialised in a similar manner to many of the Conan Doyle stories. This meant that each edition had to stand on its own merits and still grip the reader sufficiently to drive them to want to read the next instalment. Now this was quite evident when you finished one chapter and started the next - where the scene and characters would shift quite dramatically and unexpectedly, and more importantly take some time to explain why they were there in the first place.

Once I had got used to this approach the story moved along at a fair pace and yes in hindsight I should have been able to work it all out but no it was still fun to get to the final denouncement and see the whole mystery neatly wrapped up.

Andrea says

Mrs. Drabdump, of 11 Glover Street, Bow, was one of the few persons in London whom fog did not depress. She went about her work quite as cheerlessly as usual.

She is quite a brilliant, gloomy character of a landlady, and the whole of this novel was immensely enjoyable. The actual locked-room mystery was perhaps a little heavy handed, but for a serial written in four weeks -- that had the felicity of responding to some of its reader's guesses within its pages -- it is quite

awesome. I loved the nod to Dickens in the names and the form of it, but it is far funnier and stripped of most of the Dickensian sentimentality.

There are a number of funny digs at hack writing in here, in the introduction as well as the story.

So much written about the East End was written to to uncover and to educate on poverty and working class misery on the one hand, or to titillate with crime and tales of the underworld. It occurred to me halfway through this how wonderful it was to read something without any of those aims. To read something set in the East End because the East End is what the author knew, to involve the whole panoply of East End characters, from landladies to Oxford and Toynbee House gentlemen to labour organisers with political pretensions to hack journalists scrounging their way and their ongoing debates with their friends the cobblers and the ex-detectives. Some theosophy thrown in along with the socialism. It is therefore mocking and irreverent, but compassionate too. Written from the inside as one of this great diverse throng, too often reduced to caricature.

That said, there is no doubt where his sympathies lie, which of course I also loved. This is a time of organising to change the world. Near the end he allows himself an aside:

A sudden consciousness of the futility of his existence pierced the little cobbler like an icy wind. He saw his own life, and a hundred million lives like his, swelling and breaking like bubbles on a dark ocean, unheeded, uncared for.

"The Cause of the People," he murmured, brokenly, "I believe in the Cause of the People. There is nothing else."

Israel Zangwill (1864-1926) born in London to immigrant parents, was long a champion of the oppressed. In reading about the suffragettes and East End struggles, his name appears time and time again. He had a complicated relationship to Zionism, wrote numerous books and plays, including a play about America as the 'melting pot' which earned him a letter from Roosevelt. Reading this, I thought to myself he is someone I would have really loved to know, so I shall investigate further at some point -- or read more of his fiction.

Alan says

Unfortunately, it's very hard to talk about Zangwill's genius tale, *The Big Bow Mystery*, without ruining it. All I have to say is that there is a crucial moral and legal dilemma nested in this story that keeps it fresh and accessible to modern readers as, from a legal perspective, the problem proposed has yet to be fully addressed. The book's pacing is weird - it starts off strong, slows down and then goes out with a bang. I hesitate giving it four because of this, but I think that because the novella can be read in one sitting, poor pacing can be excused. I strongly recommend *The Big Bow Mystery* to lovers of mystery and those interested in law. A great read.

Anne says

After listening to Adrian Praetzell's Librivox reading of *Treasure Island*, I was curious what other books he

may have read aloud. I had never heard of Israel Zangwill or *The Big Bow Mystery*, but the description made me curious. As it turns out, it's absolutely fascinating - drags a bit in the middle, but is well worth it for the incredibly clever ending!

Mariano Hortal says

<http://lecturaylocura.com/el-gran-mis...>

El gran misterio de Bow de Israel Zangwill. Habitación cerrada: el clásico mystery

Inducir, en su tercera acepción de la RAE, indica lo siguiente:

Fil.Extraer, a partir de determinadas observaciones o experiencias particulares, el principio general que en ellas está implícito.

Que no es lo mismo que deducir:

Sacar consecuencias de un principio, proposición o supuesto.

La mayoría de las veces, las clásicas novelas policíacas se basan entonces en el método inductivo. Parece que no mucha gente es capaz de diferenciarlos. No está de más echar un vistazo rápido a sus definiciones para tenerlo claro.

Esto nos lleva a El gran misterio de Bow (1891) de Israel Zangwill que nos ha recuperado la editorial Ardicia, una clásica historia de “habitación cerrada”, el paradigma de la literatura detectivesca o mystery novels. Afortunadamente, Israel Zangwill (1864-1926), novelista británico de origen judío, no se dejó llevar, a pesar del tiempo en que fue escrita, por tópicos ni lugares comunes. Muy al contrario, fue capaz de anticipar varias de las estrategias que se utilizarían más adelante y lo realizó con verdadera eficacia. Repasaré a continuación sus virtudes, empezando por su estilo, depurado, lírico, sin estar recargado y muy funcional; muy eficaz a la hora de describir lo que va sucediendo, las metáforas y comparaciones van desde lo habitual a intentos de hacer algo distinto; la sensación que produce es de deleite a la hora de leerlo:

“Un amanecer memorable de principios de diciembre, Londres despertó en mitad de una helada niebla gris. Hay mañanas en las que esta reúne en la ciudad sus moléculas de carbono en apretados escuadrones, mientras, en las afueras, las esparce tenuemente; de tal modo que un tren matinal que se dirigiera al centro nos llevaría del crepúsculo a la oscuridad. Pero aquel día las maniobras del enemigo eran más monótonas. Desde Bow hasta Hammersmith se arrastraba un vapor bajo y apagado, como el fantasma de un suicida pobretón que hubiera heredado una fortuna inmediatamente después del acto fatal. Los barómetros y termómetros compartían simpáticamente su depresión, y su ánimo, si es que les quedaba alguno, estaba por los suelos. El frío cortaba como un cuchillo de muchas hojas.”

Es inevitable destacar su capacidad para dibujar los personajes, en particular del ex policía Grodman, sobre todo porque utiliza un fracaso para definirlo:

“No era un pájaro madrugador, ahora que ya no tenía que salir a buscar lombrices. Podía darse el lujo de despreciar refranes como este gracias a que era el propietario de su casa y de otras de la misma calle. En el barrio de Bow, donde algunos inquilinos tienden a desaparecer durante la noche dejando facturas pendientes, resulta conveniente para un casero no alejarse demasiado de sus propiedades. Tal vez, también tenía algo que ver con la elección de su lugar de residencia el deseo de disfrutar de su grandeza entre los amigos de la infancia, pues había nacido y crecido en Bow, en cuyo cuartel de Policía local había ganado sus primeros chelines trabajando como detective amateur en sus ratos libres.

Grodman aún estaba soltero. Quizás la agencia matrimonial del Cielo podía haber seleccionado una pareja para él, pero no había sido capaz de encontrarla. Fue su único fracaso como detective.”

Otra de las grandes virtudes es, sin lugar a dudas, el buen humor que destila, como podemos inducir de la siguiente declaración en el juicio de Denzil Cartecot; de hecho consigue que, una escena tan aburrida a

priori, pase sin darnos cuenta:

“A continuación, compareció Denzil Cantercot. Era poeta. (Risas). Se hallaba de camino a casa del señor Grodman, para decirle que no había podido cumplir su encargo porque estaba sufriendo “calambres de escritor”, cuando este le llamó desde la ventana del número 11 y le pidió que fuera a buscar a la Policía. No, no corrió, era un filósofo. (Risas). Les acompañó hasta la puerta, pero no subió. No tenía suficiente estómago para emociones fuertes. (Risas). La niebla gris ya era un acontecimiento lo bastante desagradable para una sola mañana. (Risas).”

Según avanza la narración se produce una confrontación, como si de un combate de boxeo se tratara; una lucha de personalidades opuestas, las de Grodman y Wimp, verdaderos artífices de un duelo detectivesco que no se atisbaba tan crudo en las primeras páginas, métodos opuestos para resolver el caso y que ponen al lector en la obligación de elegir un bando, ¿quién descubrirá el asesino?:

“Wimp era un hombre culto y de buen gusto, mientras que los intereses de Grodman se concentraban exclusivamente en los problemas que planteaban la lógica y la evidencia, y los libros sobre estos temas eran su única lectura; las bellas letras le importaban un comino. Wimp, con su inteligencia flexible, sentía un profundo desprecio por Grodman y sus métodos lentos, laboriosos y pesados, casi teutónicos. Es más, había estado a punto de eclipsar la brillante trayectoria de su predecesor gracias a algunas habilidosas y extraordinarias pinceladas de ingenio. Wimp era el mejor reuniendo pruebas circunstanciales, juntando dos y dos para que sumaran cinco.”

La nota final del autor recoge el último tema que quería destacar: la habilidad para crear la trama que lleva a un final que sorprende y que no se puede prever tan fácilmente, parece mentira que sea así en un caso del siglo XIX:

“La única persona que ha resuelto El gran misterio de Bow soy yo. No es una paradoja, sino un hecho al desnudo. Mucho antes de escribir el libro, me dije a mí mismo una noche que ningún relator de crímenes había asesinado a un hombre en una habitación a la que fuera imposible acceder. “

Evidentemente no voy a dar pistas, lo mejor es sumergirse en esta maravilla y dejarse llevar por la habilidad de Zangwill. Qué delicia poder encontrar publicado un libro como este, sobre todo para los que amamos las novelas de detectives. Me atrevo a sugerir a la editorial que podrían seguir con lo que no se ha publicado del Detection Club, hay mucho material y muy valioso.

Los textos pertenecen a la traducción de Ana Lorenzo de El gran misterio de Bow de Israel Zangwill para la edición de Ardicia.

Adam Thomas says

A pioneering work in the now-popular subgenre of "locked room mysteries." Who killed Arthur Constant, and how did they leave the room afterwards? Zangwill writes with a brilliant wit, and the set-up and denouement are well-crafted, especially for its time. The big problem is the story really drags in the middle, at one point bringing with it the feeling that you've accidentally started a different book. Worth reading, though, especially for its historical interest.

Steve says

This newspaper serial from the 1890s is a decidedly mixed blessing. In my eBook anthology, it is a bit short of a hundred pages, making me wonder if I didn't get an abridged copy. Be that as it may, there were strengths, most notably lovely language and an intriguing mystery beginning, a murdered man in a room locked and secured from the inside. In the included preface, the author acknowledges that even HE didn't

know whodunit at the beginning, and he solved it as the story neared its climax, deliberately working it out so that the murderer was one whom nobody had suspected in the readers' responses to the newspapers in which it was serialized. For this reader, that left an unsatisfactory conclusion, one which didn't follow in any compelling way from the story, a story which, given the ending, in retrospect seemed to do a lot of aimless wandering around. I would read more Zangwill for his use of language, but would be hard-pressed to recommend this mystery.

MrsER says

What a crazy book! Such strange dialogues, almost as if people were under the influence of some drug. Could not finish.

Vera Brandão says

<http://verovsky-meninadospoliciais.bl...>

Sara Eames says

This is actually two individual stories - The Big Bow Mystery and The Murders in the Rue Morgue - combined into one volume, so it wasn't initially what I was expecting. However, I did get two reasonable "locked-room" mysteries - one being much stronger than the other - but both very much "of their time". The characters were well-written but the plots moved at a very slow pace - bogged down, in some instances by too much description. The other problem is that during the Big Bow Mystery, the solution to the Murders in the Rue Morgue is given away - so there is no suspense whilst reading the second story as you already know how the murders were committed. However, these are classic murder stories - so if you enjoy this genre, it could be worth a look.

Gerry says

I saw this book and, being the so-called first locked room mystery, I just had to purchase it, especially as I have a signed postcard of Israel Zangwill on my wall, not that that matters much I suppose but I thought it would be good to read something by him. I am pleased that I did so but it was not the greatest reading experience of my life, despite the excellent and appealing billing as 'Gaslight Crime'.

The first thing to beware of in this edition is that firstly there is a preface by Nick Robinson and secondly there is a new 1895 introduction (the book was written in 1892) by the author himself and both of them give slightly more than veiled clues as to what is going to happen in the mystery that follows. Fortunately I quickly realised this and read no further until after I had finished the book - so new readers beware.

The novel itself starts rather promisingly as in Mrs Drabdump's lodging house in Glover Street, one of the

lodgers Arthur Constant does not answer the landlady's call for breakfast. She panics and goes across the road for the assistance of a neighbour, retired Scotland Yard detective George Grodman.

Between them they batter down the door to Constant's room only to discover the occupant dead with his throat slit. And not only was the door locked from the inside, all the windows were closed and there was no other ways of entry or egress to the second floor room. From this point on the novel goes rapidly downhill as there is plenty of dull and uninspiring dialogue and description as Zangwill seems to see himself as another Charles Dickens pontificating on social matters. But, sadly, he does not succeed as well as Dickens does.

Various social reforms and strikes are written about as the middle part of the tale wanders aimlessly around before we get back to the matter in hand ... how was the murder committed with a locked room scenario confronting the authorities? And, in fairness to Zangwill, he pulls back some of his reputation with a reasonable, and perhaps surprising explanation (providing that that early material hadn't been read) of what had happened and it is this combined with the vivid descriptive opening covering east end London that helped the mystery limp into the two-star bracket.

Overall it was something of a disappointment; I will look at Zangwill with a different eye as I pass him in the hallway every morning from now on!

Dan says

Generally considered the first ever "locked room mystery", the book is less about the mystery than it is about the characters involved in the investigation. Extremely well written prose. As the readers, we're afforded little in the way of detail - we're not party to the investigation itself, we don't get to see any clues, we aren't privy to any interviews or depositions, such as they may have been at the time (this book was published in 1892, London). Instead, we get to listen in to the thoughts and occasionally the conversations, of the various witnesses and one of the principal investigators, who is outside the police force. As such, most of the enjoyment of the book comes from the intricacies of their observations and musings. The end result may or may not be a surprise, it depends on how close attention you're paying to those various inner monologues, but it's not the result that matters in the last pages anyway.

Nancy Oakes says

Written originally in 1892, *The Big Bow Mystery* is supposedly the earliest example of a full-length locked-room mystery. The action begins as one Mrs Drabdump, who rents rooms to lodgers in London, goes to wake up one Mr. Constant. She can't wake him up and gets herself completely agitated to the point where she goes across the street to fetch a neighbor for help. Upon breaking down the locked and bolted door in the room, they find Mr. Constant dead. The neighbor, George Grodman, a retired detective, and Inspector Edward Wimp of Scotland Yard start investigating the crime.

This book is a bit difficult to read -- very wordy at times. However, if you get the urge to skim it, don't...the clues are all there, many of them within the space of conversations between characters.

The characterizations are just okay; I didn't personally get attached to any one character -- the focus of the book is more on the solution to the mystery, although there is an interesting rivalry between Grodman and

Wimp, which helps to add a bit to the story.

Truthfully, this is really a book for those who a) enjoy historical mysteries, b) who really like locked-room mystery (an ingenious solution awaits the patient), or people curious as to the origins of the genre. It's a bit over wordy for modern readers, and I don't think cozy mystery fans would enjoy it very much. It is a bit funny in places as well.

Overall...I'm happy I read it, but it's not one of my favorites in the genre.

Charlotte Wildflower says

I didn't like it. I probably only should have given it one star - but I recognize good prose when I hear it, and it was present several times.

The problem was that the characters were flat, the court scenes (which were legion) silly and the whole book just seemed to have been way way longer than the mystery could bear.

Given that it was a short book it is not a good indicator...

An interesting thing is a lot of information on how different people live, and society works.

The interesting lies in it being written in 1892 and a world apart from our lives today. If you are historically interested, that at least can be a help in getting you through the book.

Brad McKenna says

This has one of the better twists I've read in a murder mystery. It also follows a pattern of mysteries written in the 1890s where the person who catches the culprit explains all the clues the others have missed and how he got to the solution. It's a little different from a Poirot or Holmes story in that the reader really isn't given a chance to put the clues together. The guilty party is presented and then the explanation begins.

The story purposefully gets lost in a few characters and their roles in the labor movement that is gaining steam. And the characters seem to focus on one or two guilty parties. There's even a false reveal.

If you like classical mysteries, this is a good one for you.

Oscar says

Como cualquier buena novela que trate el *problema del cuarto cerrado* (véase 'Los crímenes de la calle Morgue', de Edgar Allan Poe, o 'El misterio del cuarto amarillo', de Gaston Leroux), 'El gran misterio de Bow' (The Big Bow Mystery, 1892), del londinense Israel Zangwill, comienza con un asesinato cometido en una habitación con las ventanas y la puerta cerradas desde el interior. Todo apunta a un suicidio, pero es imposible, ya que el arma del crimen no aparece y no hay rastros de sangre. Entonces, ¿quién es el asesino? ¿Y cómo ha cometido el asesinato?

'El gran misterio de Bow', una de las primeras de este género, plantea un juego de lógica, en el que todos los

detalles para averiguar quién es el asesino se encuentran en la novela, sin necesidad de soluciones estrambóticas de última hora. La novela tiene grandes dosis de humor, irónico tirando a negro. No se trata sólo de una novela de misterio, también es un retrato de las clases sociales del Londres victoriano, donde nos encontramos a obreros, sindicalistas, poetas y policías.

En resumen, una novela indispensable para los amantes de las historias de detectives.
