

Mystery and ministry in *Grantchester* and beyond

## **Detectives, like pastors, examine the unknowable to reveal the knowable.**

by [Adam Hearlson](#) in the [September 13, 2017](#) issue



James Norton (left) as Sidney Chambers in the ITV series *Grantchester*. Photo by Colin Hutton, © Kudos / ITV.

*In Grantchester their skins are white;  
They bathe by day, they bathe by night;  
The women there do all they ought;*

*The men observe the Rules of Thought.  
They love the Good; they worship Truth;  
They laugh uproariously in youth;  
(And when they get to feeling old,  
They up and shoot themselves, I'm told).*

—Rupert Brooke,  
“*The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*” (1912)

The clergy detective is a character type at least as old as the fourth century BCE. In the book of Daniel, the prophet Daniel solves mysteries on behalf of the Jewish diaspora in Babylon. In the story in the Apocrypha titled Susanna, Daniel interrogates the lecherous elders who have been spurned by the beautiful Susanna. Through wit and intuition, Daniel is able to lead the elders into perjury and expose their lies like an ancient Near Eastern Columbo.

In another short story, Daniel argues with his neighbors that the Babylonian deity Bel is a contraption of the priestly caste. Offended, the Babylonians explain that food is offered to the idol and the room locked, and in the morning the food is gone. What else could account for the empty altar? In this example of an early, locked-room mystery, Daniel secretly scatters ashes on the ground around the altar before the room is locked. In the morning, the food is gone, but footprints can be seen in the ashes. Secret passages into the room are found, and the chief priest and his family are revealed to be the ones at work, not Bel.

Daniel has all the makings of a good detective: courageous, quick-witted, and faithful. Moreover, he is able to solve the mysteries by never underestimating the deviousness of his opponents. The mendacity of Daniel's opponents is contrasted with Daniel's own righteousness. It is the upright spirit that can best notice those who bend toward evil.

The Reverend Canon Sidney Chambers, an Anglican priest in the village of Grantchester in postwar England, is a clergy detective in the line of Daniel. The Grantchester Mysteries (six books and three seasons of Masterpiece Theater) are the creation of James Runcie, son of Robert Runcie, who was archbishop of Canterbury in the 1980s. As the son of a minister, Runcie has intimate knowledge of the quotidian concerns of ministerial life. Chambers's constant fret over the coming sermon captures the mix of anxiety, dread, and hope known to every minister.

But Runcie isn't interested in providing a veiled biography of his father. He quickly thrusts Chambers into territory his father never tread—murder investigations. In the first story of the series, "The Shadow of Death," Chambers is approached by a woman who believes that her illicit lover has been murdered. After hearing Chambers preach, the woman is confident he understands death and loss enough to help her.

The Grantchester Mysteries reckon with World War II and its consequences. Death, loss, and pain shape the evolving identity of the small hamlet and are the inspiration for Chambers's entry into detective work. Chambers operates in a world that was once idyllic, where "women do all they ought / and men observe the Rules of thought," and he asks whether it can ever return to its Arcadian state. After so much violence, can any place be innocent any longer?

At the heart of this question is Chambers, a handsome minister plagued by memories of war, who drinks a bit too much and is more interested in detective work than ministerial trivialities. Chambers looks the part of the upright minister, but his soul is bent by the burdens of the postwar world. Tucked beneath the cozy mysteries of Grantchester are deep questions of evil, will, and faith and a minister struggling to understand the questions, much less answer them.

One obsessive cataloguer has counted more than 350 clergy detectives in literature. Anglican and Roman Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, rabbis new and old (in one series, Rabbi Gamaliel solves mysteries in ancient Jerusalem), Orthodox priests, nuns, ex-nuns, monks, imams, church administrators, a Quaker clerk of the meeting, a Shaker eldress, and even a church flower arranger have all been called on to solve mysteries.

The modern template for the clergy detective is G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown. First published in 1911, the Father Brown stories feature a parish priest "with a face as round as a Norfolk dumpling . . . and eyes as empty as the North Sea" who solves mysteries across England. Brown's acumen as a detective is born of an innate intuition of human frailty and a deep commitment to the simplicity of truth. For Father Brown, the truth is unadorned and easy to see if you have eyes to see it.

Chesterton makes a distinction between mystery and the *mysterium tremendum*, between the knowable and the unknowable. Some truths are beyond comprehension, some are just hidden, but it is the *mysterium* that reveals the

necessary truths that order the world. By attending to the unknowable, the knowable is revealed. Compared to the infinity of God, this world is quite simple. Compared to the great stirrings of the Spirit, humans are predictable.

Chesterton's version of the unveiling of mystery was influenced by his participation in a group of mystery writers that included Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers. The group took an oath that their detectives must use their wits rather than succeed through "Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God." Though the mystery might be intricately complex, the solution should never strain believability. The moment of insight should be accompanied by the reader's "Of course."

This collection of writers ushered in a golden age of mysteries in the interwar years in England. Their stories follow talented sleuths into secluded mansions or small villages. It is assumed in these golden age mysteries that order can be restored. Murder, theft, and missing persons are temporary eruptions of chaos in an otherwise ordered world. The job of the detective is to reinstate that order.

In the golden age stories, the impulse to solve a mystery is linked to nostalgia for the way things were. Village mysteries tend to embrace the conservative assumption that the past holds the key for right living in the present. The detectives take for granted the idea that the past order of the community was good; why restore it otherwise? The detective rarely examines the structural issues that might inspire the crime or bristles at the ways in which the social hierarchy empowers some and disenfranchises others.

Village detectives of this genre are far removed from the nihilistic flirtations of detectives in the city. In the city, everyone is a stranger, and the city is insecure by nature. It is too porous and craggy to ever be made safe, too big to surveil, and too anonymous to sustain any community. Amid the shadows is the city detective found in the works of Raymond Chandler, Walter Mosely, Dashiell Hammett, and Lawrence Sanders. These figures have vast networks of relationships but few friends. The city detective holds back the chaos but has long ago given up hope that the city might be redeemed or that innocence exists at all. The most the city detective can hope for is a moment of justice amid the chaos.

According to the genre, clergy detectives belong in the village and almost never show up in the modern city. The convention is that clergy detectives still believe that

Eden is an option and that finding it is as simple as catching a thief.

In setting the Grantchester Mysteries in an English hamlet, Runcie complicates the genre. Though the mysteries are set in a small town, nostalgia no longer animates the stories, order is no longer the goal, and truth is not self-evident. Chambers does not long for the past; if anything, he is trying to forget it. Moreover, Chambers always seems a bit too progressive for his small town. He fails to act as previous ministers acted. He drinks too much whiskey, suffers from symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, hates sherry, and—perhaps most concerning for his parish—is constantly playing detective.

Clergy detectives seek to make the world intelligible for others.

Runcie does not totally abandon type. His stories still assume that clergy have special understandings of human depravity and duplicity. Yet he questions whether an upright spirit can discern truth from lies. Chambers understands the deviousness of the world around him, but its pervasiveness outpaces his ability to detect it.

In one story, Chambers gets embroiled in some espionage where the duplicitousness is so intricately arranged that Chambers cannot fully unravel it. At the end he leans back into a “great cloud of unknowing,” aware that he will never find the full truth amid the web of lies. The door between the mystery and *mysterium* is shut.

This unknowing extends even to Chambers himself. A common theme in the Grantchester Mysteries is Chambers’s ambivalence about his own call to ministry. He cannot fully understand whether his attraction to detective work is a result of his lack of fitness for ministry or is a confirmation of his call. Perhaps he is lying to himself that he is called to ministry—or perhaps the detective work is ministry? In the midst of his reflections on his vocation, Chambers realizes that his capacity for self-deception is a constant threat to his ministerial identity. Yet Runcie implies that sustained internal reflection on one’s own duplicitousness ultimately makes for both a good detective and a good minister.

Chambers understands the apophatic and paradoxical wisdom that only when he embraces the darkness and chaos—in the world and in his own soul—can he find light and order. Only by reflecting on the duplicity of the call can he sustain one. Ministers live a conflicted existence: they are both Daniel adhering to the truth of God and the Babylonian priest curating a lie. Sustained and honest self-reflection does not assure ministers that they are good or honest, or even that they are called

to the work. It repositions them to see the world as it is, full of violence, murder, and evil, but also full of tenderness, affection, and deep acts of mercy.

Chambers's struggles with duplicity are the consequence of another important clergy privilege: access. With Chambers, Runcie makes the case that clergy make natural detectives because they are granted entry into the most intimate places of the social world. With so much access, mysteries are bound to find them.

Set in the England of 1953, Grantchester remains rigidly controlled by ideas of class. Only the minister can move freely across boundaries. And besides being handsome and kind, traits that open plenty of doors, Chambers is Cambridge trained, a former officer in the Scots Guard, and friends with London socialites and rural farmers alike. Depending on the mystery, he is invited to formal dinners, dines with Cambridge dons, plays cricket with Grantchester youth, and drinks with the local detective. The upper crust tolerate his snooping in a way they would never tolerate a police officer (a symbol of the lower class), and the police rely on his access to solve crimes.

Access leads Chambers into questioning the Edenic world of the village. He knows that the appearances of Grantchester are not the reality. Village life has as many shadows as the city does. Chambers can never lose sight of a fact that is easy for everyone else to ignore: for such a small village, a lot of people get murdered in Grantchester. Access reveals the depraved and the godforsaken among us. And access gives Chambers a responsibility to act.

Chambers's knowledge of the shadows also means that the community will put the burdensome questions of theodicy onto the shoulders of its minister. This is the great contribution the Grantchester Mysteries makes to the golden age detective type: clergy make good detectives because they are willing to bear the burden of theodicy.

The preeminent question of the mystery is not how or who but why. A mystery needs an explanation beyond the barest facts. We need our detectives, like our clergy, to offer an answer. The reader demands what Chesterton called an "instant of intelligibility." Chesterton added: "The story is written for the moment when the reader understands."

The Grantchester Mysteries combine that instant of intelligibility—the mystery is always solved, after all—with a vexing question that is not so easily known. Chambers understands that some questions don't have answers at all. He is not

under the illusion that catching a thief will return the village to a more innocent time or impose order on a chaotic world. Chambers killed men at the battle of Normandy and liberated prisoners at Bergen-Belsen; any innocence he might have had was sacrificed on the bloody beaches of France and in the sea of corpses in the concentration camps. These images follow him and challenge any theological piety.

Runcie, drawing on his father's experience as a soldier and minister, understands that in the wake of such carnage, little is left but unanswerable questions of why. Chambers is a new type of clergy detective: he desperately wants to answer those questions but knows that questions just lead to more questions. Catching the murderer and understanding the motive is a proper ending, not a proper answer.

Runcie proposes that we continue to long for leaders who can combine access and understanding with gentleness and grace, who can hear the confessions of the world with empathy and tenderness, and who privilege ragged honesty above manicured mendacity. The cold deductions of science and technology might solve some mysteries, but they don't answer the spiritual and psychological pleas contained in the question "why?" Chambers knows that the world is not "elementary." It is unrelentingly manifold, circuitous, irrational, and very often brutal. No single minister, even ones skilled in the arts of detection, can answer all the questions that haunt our communities.

Clergy detectives of every stripe continue to seek intelligibility on our behalf. In the long tradition, each has asked the questions of their world and furnished answers for their time, but they never stopped asking or searching. The clergy detective lives on the margin of the community, not holding back the evil, but courageously hunting for the answers to our deepest questions of good, evil, order, and chaos. The clergy detective knows that the community will soon again assemble in the pews, and while they might not get all of their questions answered, they want to hear something from a willing sleuth.

*A version of this article appears in the September 13 print edition under the title "Minister as detective."*