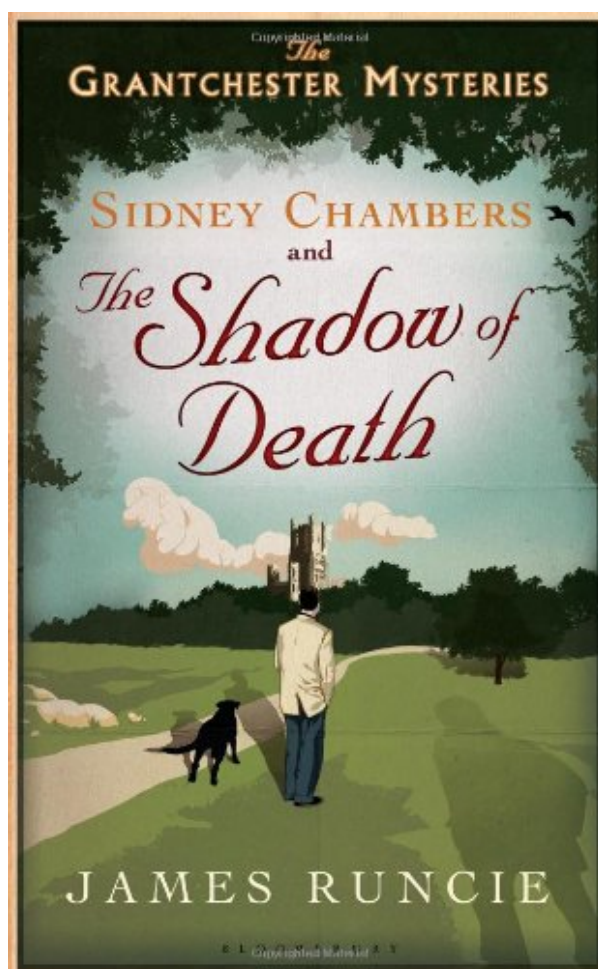
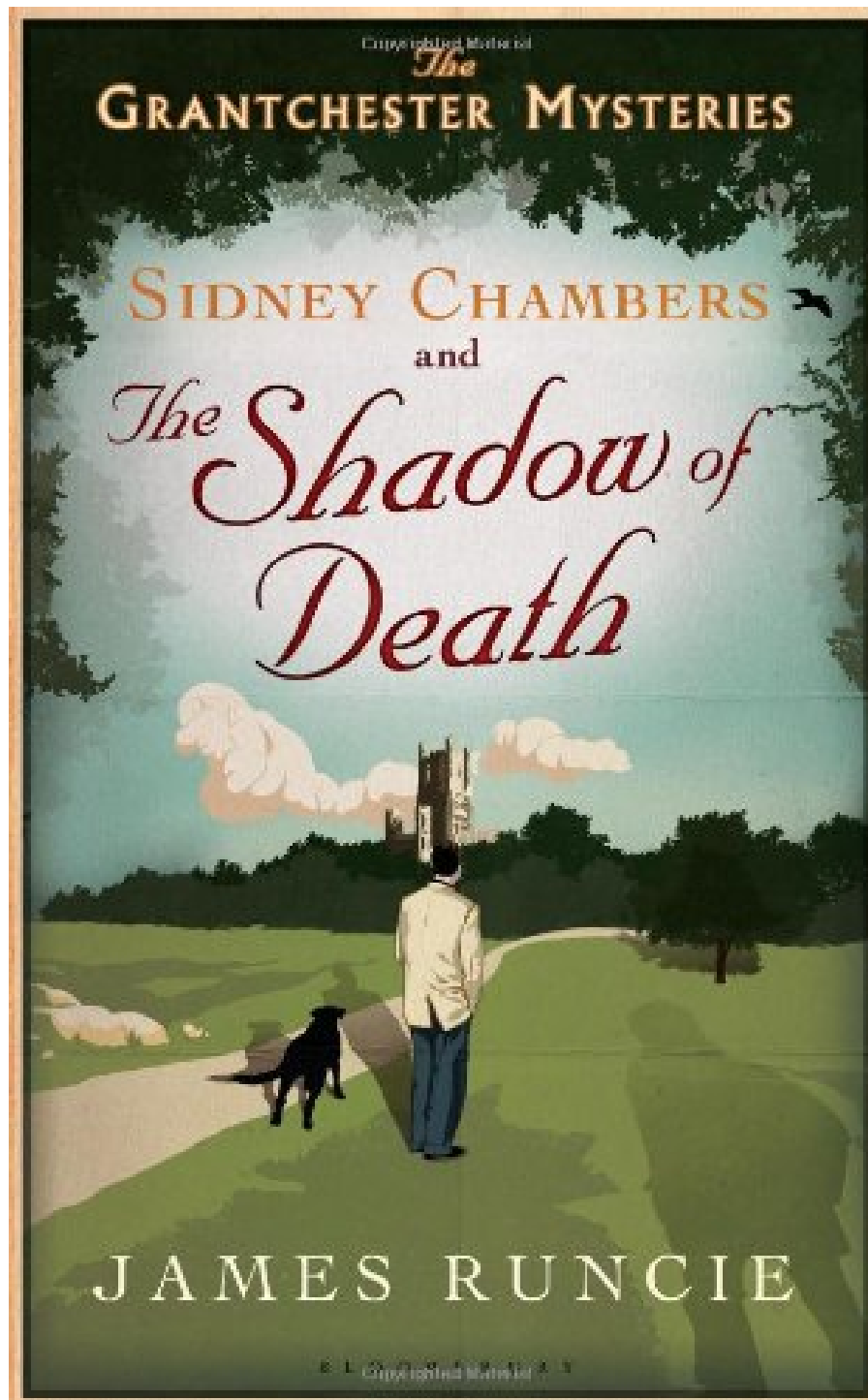


**SIDNEY CHAMBERS AND THE SHADOW OF
DEATH: THE GRANTCHESTER MYSTERIES
BY JAMES RUNCIE**



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It is 1953, the coronation year of Queen Elizabeth II . Sidney Chambers, vicar of Grantchester and honorary canon of Ely Cathedral, is a thirty-two-year-old bachelor. Tall, with dark brown hair, eyes the color of hazelnuts, and a reassuringly gentle manner, Sidney is an unconventional clerical detective. He can go where the police cannot.

Together with his roguish friend, inspector Geordie Keating, Sidney inquires into the suspect suicide of a Cambridge solicitor, a scandalous jewelry theft at a New Year's Eve dinner party, the unexplained death of a jazz promoter's daughter, and a shocking art forgery that puts a close friend in danger. Sidney discovers that being a detective, like being a clergyman, means that you are never off duty, but he nonetheless manages to find time for a keen interest in cricket, warm beer, and hot jazz--as well as a curious fondness for a German widow three years his junior.

With a whiff of Agatha Christie and a touch of G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown, The Grantchester Mysteries introduces a wonderful new hero into the world of detective fiction.

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150 of 155 people found the following review helpful.

... seeing the Masterpiece Mystery premiere and I was not disappointed. I found that some of the most wonderful ...

By COH

I bought this after seeing the Masterpiece Mystery premiere and I was not disappointed. I found that some of the most wonderful lines spoken in the TV program came straight from the book. I do want to state clearly that the series is only a "mystery" in that Sidney involves himself in amateur detecting. So many critical reviews are about the weakness of the mystery component. This series is NOT a mystery series, it is a series about an appealing and interesting character, his struggles and contradictions, his journey in life, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. A cast of amusing characters, including his dog, Dickens, add humor and warmth. Please don't draw comparisons with other mystery writers. This is a story with mysteries, not a mystery story!

59 of 63 people found the following review helpful.

A review from Bookworm1858

By bookworm1858

I like finding new detectives in mystery stories and the setting for this one, early 1950s, sounded pleasingly

different. Our detective, as you might have surmised from the title, is Sidney Chambers, vicar of Grantchester, the quiet English village. Through the short stories in this collection, Sidney is induced to become involved in investigating several mysterious crimes. He is friendly with an inspector and his position in the church lends some authority to his actions while rendering his investigations relatively unobtrusive to the wrongdoer.

Despite the nature of the crimes (the violence of several murders and two thieveries), this is a very quiet book. This is perfect for those of us who like cozies, who don't necessarily want violence in their reading material but may not work for people who want suspense. I'll admit that there were times when it seemed too slow but I enjoyed the leisurely pace. It seems fitting for the time and place, where rationing is only finally starting to end, where televisions have yet to grace practically every household. We also get insight into Sidney's spiritual and personal life, from the way he feels about his preaching to potential wife material.

The quality of the stories varies. I really liked the story of the missing engagement ring while I found the one about the missing portrait to be quite sickening and much darker than the other stories. Although each mystery provides the framing and ostensible purpose for the story, it does not always come across as the most important element. Sidney's romantic connections and his life in the church sometimes overshadow his investigations, drawing my attention and sympathy. While each short story is self-contained, it is good to read all of them because the characters drift through, sometimes in London, sometimes in Cambridge. What we learn in the previous story provides additional color to the next.

Overall: Slower than what I had expected but not without its charms. Sidney is a fascinating character and I would definitely be interested to spend more time with him.

85 of 93 people found the following review helpful.

A vicar solves mysteries while fretting about his vocation

By TChris

Sidney Chambers is an unlikely detective. As the vicar of the Church of St. Andrew and St. Mary in Grantshire, he is more comfortable hearing confessions than seeking them out, but crime seems to have a way of chasing him. The first volume in a projected series of six collectively known as "The Grantchester Mysteries," Sidney Chambers and the Shadow of Death is really a series of connected stories, each with its own title, rather than a typical novel. Recurring characters include Sidney's good friend Inspector Keating, his sister Jennifer, the close female friend, Amanda Kendall, with whom he dances around the topic of romance, his surly housekeeper and his pious curate. The stories are these:

"The Shadow of Death" - Shortly after Sidney presides over Stephen Staunton's funeral following Staunton's suicide in 1953, Pamela Morton takes Sidney aside and declares her belief that Staunton, with whom she had been having an affair, had been murdered. All the while wondering why he's getting involved, Chambers chats with various suspects. Along the way Chambers manages to tipple a bit of whiskey despite everyone's assumption that he would prefer sherry. This proves to be fortuitous as whiskey furnishes the first significant clue to the best mystery in the book.

"A Question of Trust" - An engagement ring presented at a New Year's Eve dinner party disappears. The mystery makes for pleasant but unexciting reading.

"First, Do No Harm" - A woman promises her mother that she will not marry while her mother is still alive. When the mother's death coincides with the woman's engagement, Sidney suspects foul play while finding time to ponder the ethics of euthanasia. There is very little mystery in this one.

"A Matter of Time" - When Sidney goes to a jazz club, a friend's sister is strangled during the drum solo. The murderer, like everyone else in these stories, turns out to be quite well mannered.

"The Lost Holbein" - A rare portrait has been stolen and replaced with a forgery. This story puts Amanda in the forefront of tracking down the wrongdoer, leaving Sidney to come to her rescue. A predictable yarn and again, not much of a mystery.

"Honourable Men" - Sidney takes a minor role in Julius Caesar. On opening night, the actor playing Caesar is actually stabbed to death. The story strives for social relevance but Sidney's attitudes, far ahead of their time, seem artificial. Despite its preposterous set-up, the story at least presents a mystery, albeit one that is easily solved.

This is a gentle, civilized book, filled with conversation and thought rather than gun battles and thrilling escapes. Sidney spends as much time fretting about being a better priest as he does solving mysteries. Perhaps a more religiously observant reader will relate to Sidney's internal struggles, but he seems like such a squeaky clean guy that I had difficulty understanding his anxiety. I agree with much of Sidney's overriding philosophy -- his respect for privacy, his belief that "we must think the best of people" -- but a pleasant state of mind does not suffice to make a character interesting.

The stories may appeal to fans of cozy mysteries; Sidney is likable and the text is free of profanity. For my taste, the stories are a bit dull. Perhaps the characters, including most of those who are supposed to be sinister, are just too nice. Instead of a police procedural we're given a clergyman procedural detailing the life of a determinedly unexciting vicar. His work, his love of jazz, and his chaste admiration of Amanda Kendall might be enough to fill his life but they do little to ward off the reader's drowsiness. More problematic is that most of the stories fail to meet the test of a good mystery; they are just too easy to solve.

James Runcie writes in a low-key style that is fluid, sometimes elegant, occasionally stuffy, and too often long-winded. He doesn't quite know when a story should end, or he feels the need to give Sidney yet another chance to sermonize. Given my admiration of Runcie's prose, I am sorry that I cannot give Sidney Chambers my wholehearted recommendation. The stories simply lack the kind of tension that a mystery should deliver, and they don't succeed as character-driven literature, although they try to be both. If I could, I would give the book 3 1/2 stars.

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