

P.D James

Video Interview Transcript for the Portrait Explorer in the IT Gallery

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How do you view this portrait of yourself?

As a writer I should say this is an elderly woman and an elderly woman of some authority in the world so, whatever she does is fairly powerful I think in that world. She is a woman who surrounds herself with objects and that can tell us quite a lot. I think she's a woman who is confident, I don't know that I'd know a great deal more, I think I would be fairly certain that she was a woman who was an artist, a writer, not I think in public life in the sense of being a politician. I feel that this woman is in some way an artist, either visually or with the written word. I think there's a certain endurance in the face, I think it's the face of someone who has lived a very full life and had a large number of very different experiences in that life and I think there is a brain ticking away there, somehow analysing the moment at which the portrait was being painted. There's a scrutiny and sharpness in the eyes I think. Not altogether an easy woman I imagine, I think possibly a rather secretive one. That would be my reading of it.

What constitutes a successful portrait?

A successful portrait should be a true and honest picture of the sitting, of the sitter, as the painter sees him or her, it should be honest. It might please the sitter or it might not, but the painter really, if he's a good painter really has no option but to paint what he sees. I remember when I was sitting I said to Michael 'are you trying to make me look grim and mysterious?' and he said, 'I'm not trying to make you look anything, I have enough difficulty painting what I see'. And I thought that is the mark of a good portraitist, he was painting what he saw, not what other people might see or what other people might expect or what I might expect, he was painting what he saw and painting it with absolutely intense concentration.

Did you enjoy sitting for the portrait?

Being a sitter for a portrait is certainly a rather extraordinary experience I think, I'm quite good at sitting still for a long time, that doesn't worry me, but I'm good at it because I want to go into my private world but every time I went into my private world thinking about the novel, the state I was in the novel, what I was going to do, Michael would say quite quickly 'You're not looking at me'. I knew what he meant, that I had taken my attention away from him so it was quite difficult in that I wasn't able to sort of sit there quite peaceably and dream away, I had to participate by looking at him and from time to time he would look at me - these darting glances of huge, great intensity, so that I think can be quite disconcerting. It's also very tiring I think for both parties because there is this concentration, I was surprised how much concentration is part of the process. We worked for quite a long time but every now and then it really was very necessary to stop for both our sakes.

What is the veiled sculpture?

In the picture there's one of course dominant object and Michael has chosen to paint that disproportionately large, and that is a Victorian head. It's called 'The Veiled Bride'. When I bought it, it looked more to me like a corpse really I'm afraid, a shroud, but that is not what it's supposed to be. I'm very fond of it indeed, I love Victoriana and this is an object I have in my drawing room and I'm very happy to have it in the portrait. I think too that it is slightly symbolic because it is mysterious and I think it is a little sinister so it was a very good object. If Michael wanted an object in the painting, it was a very good object to choose and if he had asked me what object would I want, one object I particularly wanted, I think I would have said this. I think we were very happy in having 'the Veiled Bride' there

Were you surprised on seeing the final portrait for the first time?

I think a certain amazement really when I first saw it, followed at once by a conviction that this was a portrait beautifully painted, the skill of the painting impressed me tremendously. It's one little stab at death and disillusion, it's one where something can be preserved for posterity and it's possible to look at them and know what happened to them and they're not entirely dead, they aren't, they're there and we look at them and we're told, what they did and the sort of lives they had, how many children they had and they're unchanging on the walls. We look at them and they look back at us.

How do you feel people think about crime writers?

I think that very often when people meet a crime writer, they imagine that she has spent a lot of time with the police actually investigating crime which of course is a total nonsense and never happens, and also that she has some extraordinary insight into the criminal mind, that is not necessarily so either but every good writer is fascinated by the human mind and of course, to an extent, the criminal mind. With the detective story I'm particularly interested in the motives which compel often normally law-abiding and successful people to cross that invisible line which divides a murderer from the rest of us. I'm fascinated in exploring human beings under the trauma of a police investigation for this unique crime. I'm fascinated by human beings in closed societies and the way they relate to each other. I don't know how much one can see of that fascination in Michael Taylor's portrait of me, it'd be interesting if people came to look at it and knew nothing about me at all and were asked 'what does this woman do?' I think it's a face of someone who has looked on the darker side of life, certainly.