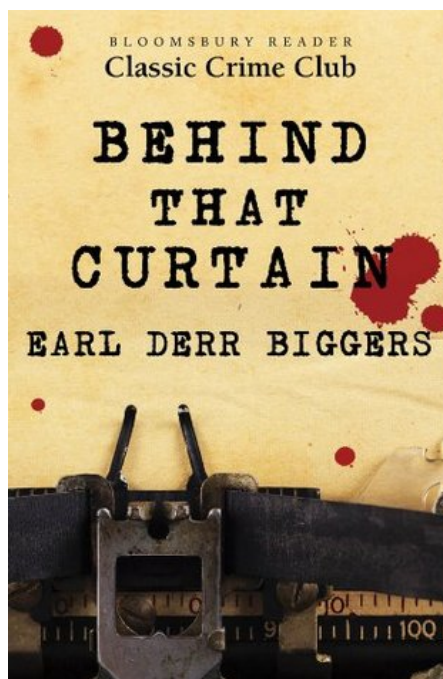




Behind That Curtain

Earl Derr Biggers

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The third novel in the Charlie Chan series, set almost exclusively in California (as opposed to Chan's native Hawaii), and tells the story of the former head of Scotland Yard, a detective who is pursuing the long-cold trail of a murderer. Fifteen years ago, a London solicitor was killed in circumstances in which the only clue was a pair of Chinese slippers, which he apparently donned just before his death. Sir Frederic Bruce has been following the trail of the killer ever since. He has also been interested in what appears to be a series of disappearing women around the world, which has some connection to the disappearance of a woman named Eve Durand in rural India also fifteen years ago. Just when it seems he might finally solve the murder case, at a dinner party to which a number of important and mysterious guests have been invited, Inspector Bruce is killed -- and was last seen wearing a pair of Chinese slippers, which have vanished. It is left to Chan to solve the case and tie up all loose ends.

Behind That Curtain Details

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Johnny says

Charlie Chan and his *faux* “Confucianisms” is an unfortunate stereotype. Fortunately, the novels of Earl Derr Biggers don’t have Caucasians playing the character as so many did in the movies (as well as Fu Manchu in movies and television). Frankly, I find the “Confucianisms” in Biggers’ Chan novels to be very funny—preposterous, but gently popping the balloon of the prejudiced investigators, witnesses, and suspects with these odd witticisms. *Behind That Curtain* is no exception. Charlie (still a Sergeant in the Honolulu Police Force) is in San Francisco and gets pulled into an investigation of a fellow-detective’s murder. The local detective is a clueless Irish detective (Hey! I’m part Irish and my wife is Chinese; we should both be upset at this book.) who is very prejudiced against the Chinese. He might have learned something if he had actually listened to some of Charlie’s strange figures of speech.

At one point, Detective Flannery seems determined to confront a witness, but Chan advises that it would tip off their ultimate suspect. Chan says, “We permit him to lie [low], like winter overcoat in closet in a heated term.” (p. 70) To the lovely female assistant D.A. who asks Chan why he didn’t share information with Flannery at one point, he replied, “Can you speak of the ocean to a well frog or the ice to a summer insect?” (p. 126) Later, when Flannery is patronizing Chan because the Irishman “solved” the case instead of Charlie, the Chinese detective seems to compliment Flannery while really giving advice: “The wise man digs his well before he is thirsty.” (p. 204) After Flannery’s moment blows up (sorry if that’s a spoiler, it’s foreshadowed enough I don’t think you would have been surprised), Charlie has to admonish the mainland authority to have patience. “As the Chinese say, ‘In time, the grass becomes milk.’” (p. 214)

Some of these sayings are merely interesting. You’ve heard of a “busman’s holiday?” Chan tries to explain why he wants to leave before the case is solved by noting, “Postman on his holiday, they tell me, takes long walk. I have taken same, and I am weary.” (pp. 55-56) The metaphor recurs several times in the book and is quite apropos. Others sound very like a traditional saying such as stepping into a pool of water muddies it and one has to wait for it to clear.

Somehow, modern society has become so easily offended that this character who, at least in the novels, exposes the weakness of prejudice and stereotyping (Who would have expected to see a female assistant D.A. in a novel published in 1928?) even while using the conceit of a humble Chinese detective who spouts “folk sayings” and is much smarter than those who patronize him or are hostile to him. Yet, my quibble with this novel (which I enjoyed in spite of its shortcomings) is based on the solution to the mystery. Oh, it’s a good mystery with a “red herring” or two that you WISH to be guilty, but the final revelation is rather like an Agatha Christie novel. The real killer seems to have an ironclad alibi, but Biggers doesn’t lay the groundwork for that alibi. He sets up the evidence one way and undercuts it at a later point when Chan discovers the meaning of a clue that I thought was going to hinge on identifying the handwriting. So, I didn’t think that was fair. Fair or not, though, I enjoyed the book.

Paul Cornelius says

By far the best mystery yet of the three Charlie Chan novels I have read. And not only the mystery. Even the perspective of the book is thrown in doubt and then tossed into the air repeatedly. As with the first two books, I expected the main protagonist to be yet another White man, with Charlie working behind the scenes. But *Behind That Curtain* changes things up quite a bit. At first, it seems as if this is the story of Bill Rankin,

the reporter. But Rankin quickly disappears into the background. Then, we're introduced to Barry Kirk. Aha! The typical hero of the first two novels—a wealthy socialite in pursuit of a reluctant young woman. But, no, that doesn't work out either. Then, just for a second, it seems as if we're centering in on the young woman, Asst. D.A. June Morrow. But not really. Yes, it seems, finally, that it's Charlie Chan who is driving the action. And that is mostly true, although Kirk and Morrow continue to have their moments. It's all just another part of the puzzle, really, that Earl Derr Biggers has given us. And it also marks another point in the evolution of the Charlie Chan character. Here, he is standing all alone, solving his case despite the interference, doubts, and outright deception on the part of almost everyone else—including Charlie's relatives and fellow Chinese in San Francisco's Chinatown.

The setting? It almost fits to a tee the model for the classical detective story. Somehow, Biggers has put his reader in the teeming metropolis of San Francisco but also managed to isolate his characters in a bungalow atop a modern skyscraper. A few trips occur—to the D.A.'s office, a club, some restaurants, Chinatown, and some residences. But things always come back to the bungalow, which is almost as lonely and remote as any country house, where whodunits so often take place. There is even a butler in this story. Hard-boiled versus Classic detective. Elements of both exist—although Charlie is certainly no anti-hero. And the hard-boiled, as a genre, was just getting started. Clever man, Biggers.

By this point in the series, Chan is not only endearing, he is someone comforting. With Charlie on the case, things cannot help but work out to the reader's satisfaction. And, yes, it doesn't spoil the plot to say that Kirk gets the girl at the end. A Charlie Chan novel is nothing, if not cathartic.

Sg.00 says

Charlie Chan in San Francisco ~ he wants to go home, but the mystery MUST be solved!

#3 in the series.

Wyntroire says

Reread.

Lizzytish says

Poor Chan is trying to get back to Hawaii and the birth of his 11th son. Unfortunately, he is needed in San Francisco to help solve a murder.

Sally says

Charlie Chan is in San Francisco now, with a cold case that even Scotland Yard couldn't solve. It seemed to last a little long, but it was an enjoyable read.

Phrodrick says

In Earl Biggers' third outing for Charlie Chan, the Hawaiian detective is returning from solving the Chinese Parrot murder case and anxious to return home to his 11th and newest child.

However, in San Francisco he meets a friend and grudgingly becomes involved another murder mystery. While possible suspects are at a party (with Charlie Chan in attendance), Sir Frederick Bruce, retired Chief Inspector, Scotland Yard is murdered one floor below. This case is a modified form of the locked room mystery. Sir Fredrick had intentionally made it easy for his attacker to enter the room, but he had baited it to attract only one person.

Between the suspects in this case and the representatives of the law, present are: a woman assistant DA, a short tempered American police captain, a steely eyed international explorer, other members of Scotland Yard, a rich charming American and his equally rich aunt, the requisite suspicious butler and a handful of other period types. It would appear that Biggers is deliberately trying to bounce different stereotypical murder mystery characters against each other.

Given the modern sensibilities about the way Charlie Chan is usually portrayed; the one character who is most insistent that Charlie Chan is just a 'China man', is the American police officer and he will have his nose rubbed in his prejudice. Most of the characters are somewhat startled at the concept of an attractive female DA handling a major murder case. She proves herself to be more than competent earns the respect of all. She is also able to hold her own in a budding romance. This is relatively modern stuff for a Jazz age novelist.

Biggers does a good job presenting and nurturing his red herrings while allowing the evidence to unfold. The reader is present as this evidence is uncovered. The test of a well-written mystery is that the reader, by paying attention can solve it before the reveal. In Behind that Curtain, it is just possible to guess "whodunit", but there is a difference between guessing the solution and having the evidence. This book walks that line very closely.

Sam Bissell says

Last Winter, I went on a tear through all of Earl Derr Biggers' Charlie Chan mysteries. I was mesmerized by the famous detective, both for his incredibly interesting sleuthing skills and the fact that all of the stories are set in the 1930's. Consequently, as you read through his storytelling, you are transported to a completely different land of enchantment and mystery with, as always, more than one suspect to keep Charlie hot on multiple trails!

This book takes place in San Francisco shortly after the action in the previous book, The Chinese Parrot, which took place in the burgeoning area of Palm Springs. In this tale, nearly all of the action takes place at a dinner party, where an old friend of Charlie's, Chief Inspector Sir Frederic Bruce of Scotland Yard is murdered in an office a flight down from the party. Sir Frederic was on the tail of his own culprit and had his own clues that he was tracking down, which he manages to divulge to Charlie before his demise!

Off on the trail goes our Charlie, along with a bumbling San Francisco detective, who is put on the case. Along for the ride, Charlie can hardly resist a challenge from a beautiful, intelligent woman like June Morrow, deputy district attorney and the lawyer in charge of prosecuting Sir Frederic's murder, as well as a steely eyed international explorer, other members of Scotland Yard, a rich charming American and his equally rich aunt, the requisite suspicious butler and a handful of other period types. It seems that Biggers

deliberately filled the tale with as many stereotypical murder mystery characters as possible.

Unlike previous tales, which take place out and about in the areas where they are set (early 1920s Honolulu in the first story and later 1920s Palm Springs in the second), this one takes place almost entirely in a closed apartment in San Francisco in the early 1930s. Still, it matters not that we are stuck in an apartment that is connected to an office one level down, the mysterious atmosphere is still imparted through the imagined dress of our perpetrators, who are almost entirely rich snobs.

Biggers does a good job presenting and nurturing his red herrings while allowing the evidence to unfold. The test of a well-written mystery is that the reader, by paying attention can solve it before the entire mystery is revealed. In Behind that Curtain, it is just possible to guess "whodunit", but there is a difference between guessing the solution and having the evidence. This book walks that line very closely and trips up the reader who thinks he/she has actually got the culprit!

As I have suggested to others, having read the entire series already, you would do yourself a favor to read the entire set of 6 books. Each one has something else to show you and the amount of Charlie Chan witticisms that we all know and spout (like Confucius) are absolutely endless!

Paul Mendez says

Another classic Charlie Chan mystery. I just can't get enough of these entertaining novels. I too wish there were more of the Charlie Chan novels.

Mr. Biggers has a writing style that I find appealing. I like the clever way he keeps Charlie Chan's dialogue in harmony with his personality; and the informative and entertaining depiction of 1920s San Francisco. Chan plays a larger role in this novel which I like. I find it interesting that Chan encounters no personal violence in solving crimes; there are no salacious episodes, yet Biggers manages to captivate you by clever dialogue, creative character development and storyline.

Tommy Verhaegen says

Typische Charlie Chan waarin veel gebeurt, vele theorieën worden gespuid en enkel Charlie Chan uiteindelijk de situatie doorziet en de zaak tot aller verbazing oplost. De underdog blijkt eens te meer de meester te zijn. Zijn onderdanigheid en gebrekkig Engels (Nederlands in vertaling) zouden vandaag niet meer aanvaard worden maar meteen ook het einde van de detective betekenen.

Gelukkig betaan er nog oude uitgaven. Uiteraard speelt het verhaal zich vele jaren terug af wat wel wat inlevingsvermogen van de lezer vraagt om de plot te kunnen volgen. De snelheid van trein ten opzichte van boot, handgeschreven brief ten opzichte van telegram spelen een rol. Moderne multi-media bestonden hoogstens in embryonale vorm. Dat maakt het boek ook heerlijk nostalgisch om lezen, rustgevend zonder het huidige hectische gedoe, verwonderlijk hoe dingen vroeger gedaan werden. En dan een mooie whodunit er boven op. Met veel humor.

Melva Clark says

Take into consideration that this book was written in 1928, and enjoy it. It was fun. I enjoyed Charlie Chan very much.

Mark Short says

This was a very enjoyable read. Possibly the best Chan book so far. Good characters, a lot of misleading plot developments.

Bobby Underwood says

"The moment has charm." -- Charlie Chan

Earl Derr Biggers wrote in a style which lent itself to romance as well as mystery. Perhaps only M.M. Kaye blended the two as perfectly as Biggers. His greatest creation, Charlie Chan, is in romantic San Francisco in *Behind That Curtain*, but he can feel the trade winds of Hawaii calling him back to Honolulu for the birth of his eleventh child. Yet the romance of a misty San Francisco filled with the Orient beckon him to remain long enough to solve a crime.

Bill Rankin is the reporter bringing the visiting sleuth from Honolulu, together with Scotland Yard's, Sir Frederic Bruce, to write a feature based on their exploits. But it is Frederic's regrets in connection with an unsolved murder, and the seemingly unrelated disappearance of Eve Durand from India nearly 15 years prior, that haunt their conversation. Barry Kirk and the pretty young D.A. he's immediately smitten with, June Morrow, plead for Charlie to stay when Sir Frederic is murdered. There are as many suspects to ponder over as there are mysterious clues. But which is that elusive "essential clue" so beloved by Scotland Yard?

Charlie initially wants no part in the investigation. Only once onboard the S.S. Maui does Charlie overhear a conversation which has him rushing down the gangplank to join Barry and June. Captain Flannery's methods, however, are as heavy-handed as Charlie's are subtle. Charlie discovers evidence of two other missing young women, and suspects a possible connection to yet another unsolved murder. How does a world famous adventurer fit into the picture? Are the slippers the essential clue, or something else? In the end, of course, our favorite detective from the Islands realizes the clue has been there all along.

Behind That Curtain has so much atmosphere it washes over the reader like a sudden rain shower. San Francisco during the '20s is alive with cable cars, and quaint bungalows for shelter from the rain, beneath the delicate pen of Earl Derr Biggers. Dark passages and murder do exist in Biggers's mysteries, but he always allows the elegant Chan to guide us away from danger, and towards romance.

There is an innocence to the romance between Barry and June indicative of another time, as is the writing style of Biggers. Both Biggers and his creation, Charlie Chan, are at the top of their game here, funny and wise. The final scenes hold humor and a dash of romance. *Behind That Curtain* offers one of the most charming endings of any entry in the Charlie Chan canon. A must read for those who like their mysteries very old-fashioned, and a bit on the romantic side.

Michele bookloverforever says

I'm a Charlie Chan addict

Bill says

One of the best of the Chan series I've read so far. Lots of fun, great mystery, and well put together.
