

The First Two Pages: “Mad About You”

By G.M. Malliet

From *Malice Domestic: Mystery Most Geographical* (Wildside Press)

“Mad About You” is a short story appearing in this year’s *Malice Domestic Anthology, Murder Most Geographical*, presented by Nancy Pickard. Stories written for a themed anthology can be a helpful challenge: You don’t have to choose a theme, as a theme has been chosen for you. Since I love to travel, I welcomed this chance to portray two typical American tourists on a “Roots” trip to the UK. This allowed me to combine a travel leitmotif with an idea I had been kicking around for some time and hadn’t known how to exploit. The discovery my characters make on their journey does have to do with roots, if not the roots they had been hoping to find.

And they make yet another discovery of genealogical roots—just not their own.

This type of tourist is a common sight in the UK, as there is an endless fascination with this beautiful land of castles, kings, and queens that also produced so many immigrants to North America. I am one of the tourists often to be found haunting the coves and fishing villages of Cornwall, hoping for some connection, however nebulous, to the Tintagel of King Arthur or—more likely—to a tin-mining family. Either way, I have always viewed the UK as my paradise lost.

The opening lines of “Mad About You” read as follows: “We got off the ferry at Avebury Cove, a village along England’s Jurassic Coast.” There is no Avebury Cove, but my story is set in Dorset, and the exact if imaginary location is spelled out more clearly in the paragraphs that follow. The reader learns right away that travel is involved—travel by ferry. And in the next paragraph the reader learns another important factor, the time of year: “England was tipping into winter.” It is important that the writer work in the “where” and the “when” quickly to orient readers and settle them in to the yarn the writer is about to spin. And in a short story, there are few words to waste doing this. This is so often not the place for flowery language—the “boring bits” that Elmore Leonard cautioned writers to leave out.

Point of view also needs to be established quickly. “Mad About You” is a story told in the rather caustic tone of the wife in the roots-seeking couple, who seems to regard the entire trip to this obscure village as pure self-indulgence on her husband’s part. She tells us in the third paragraph that she’d rather not know much about her own ancestors, and that “Douglas would be wise to follow” her example. It turns out, of course, that she is right. But she is also trying to be a good sport and not complain about all the hiking through churchyards in chilly weather as her husband seeks out old tombstones.

And looking on the bright side, she likes it that they are staying in an old cliff-top hotel offering a full English breakfast every day.

The choice of hotel, based loosely on a real hotel my husband and I stayed at in Yorkshire, was critical for two reasons. It is very near a cliff, which will play a key part in the calamity to come. To adapt Chekhov's advice about guns: Never include a cliff in the first act unless someone is going to be shoved off it by the third.

A hotel is a place where strangers gather, making it the ideal setting for a mystery, going back to the days of *At Bertram's Hotel* with Miss Marple. In strange and temporary surroundings, we tend to make instant judgments of people and their circumstances based on what they present to us: their hair, their clothing, their makeup, who they travel with, and so on. They are away from their usual habitats, which would normally provide us with a wealth of clues.

And so, untethered, we may make mistakes in our assessments, having so little information to go on and only ourselves as witnesses.

Travelers like my two characters may also be reluctant to get involved with what may or may not be a criminal enterprise. Back in their US hometown, they might make different choices. In a foreign land, even one as civilized as the UK is purported to be, they want to be very sure of their footing—pun intended—before they make accusations that might delay their vacation to no good purpose.

I hope you will read and enjoy “Mad About You” and all the excellent travel stories in this year’s Malice Domestic Anthology, *Murder Most Geographical*.

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G. M. Malliet’s first St. Just mystery, *Death of a Cozy Writer*, won the 2008 Agatha Award for Best First Novel and was chosen by *Kirkus Reviews* as a best book of the year. It was nominated for many awards, including the Anthony, Macavity, and a Left Coast Crime award for best police procedural. Her subsequent mysteries and short stories have been nominated for nearly every major crime-writing award. Writes *Cleveland.com*: She "may be the best mystery author writing in English at the moment (along with Tana French). She's certainly the most entertaining...." She and her husband live on the East Coast and travel often to the UK, the setting for all her books. Visit her at GMMalliet.com.