

SUMMARY * LITTLE DEATHS

Little Deaths is a historical murder mystery that follows Simon Wise, a Jewish police inspector in 1875 Victorian London, as he attempts to unravel the mysterious death of Lady Alicia Fairhaven, an independently wealthy, aristocratic lady with an intriguing past. Although to a less well-trained eye, her demise appears to be the accidental aftermath of an interrupted burglary, Simon notices that the composition of the artfully arranged room suggests a *painting* of a burglary, suggesting a far more sinister and debauched crime. Although he impresses his loyal Scottish sergeant, Thomas Murdoch, with this insight, for Simon, still mourning the death in childbirth of his beloved wife Rachel three years earlier, the police work which he used to love has become rote and meaningless. Nevertheless, he is moved to pity for the young daughter of the murder victim, whom he begins to see as a mother torn from her children by a brutal, unbalanced act. Perhaps too quickly, he convinces himself that her debt-ridden husband Sir Gregory is the most likely culprit, either singly or in collusion with his paramour, the seductive Arabella, and sets out to prove the baronet's guilt.

This single-mindedness, bordering on obsession, worries the bluff Murdoch, whose affection for Simon stretches back almost 20 years, when they were comrades during the horrors of the Crimean War. Murdoch knows that their superior, the antisemitic Superintendent Walker, would like nothing better than for Simon to make a misstep on a case. Unfortunately, until now, Simon has had an exemplary career, but Walker thinks he sees a unique opportunity to trap Simon in an impossible situation.

This is because the other leading suspect in the Fairhaven murder is Baron Nathaniel Rothstein, a fabulously wealthy banker who is one of the most powerful men in England. Walker hopes Simon's admiration for his co-religionist will cloud his judgment and lead to his downfall on the force. Indeed, in terms of the Fairhaven case, Rothstein has method, means, and motive - a secret he desperately needs to keep hidden from his wife and from society at large. Like Lewis Carroll, the baron likes little girls *en deshabille*, but, unlike the mathematician and author of *Alice in Wonderland*, he has been unable to exercise the moral restraint sufficient to guarantee his continued influence with the British government should his predilections be exposed.

As the Fairhaven investigation proceeds through a winding course that incorporates the Houses of Parliament and the Lambeth slums, Simon crosses paths with titled nobility and denizens of the criminal underworld. He uncovers much more than he bargained for, including Lady Alicia's suffragist and feminist activities, Sir Gregory's penchant for fathering out-of-wedlock children, a race-track scam, and a child pornography cabal. However, none of the pieces quite fit, and he can't make a case. Meanwhile, a series of peculiar baby deaths comes to his attention, all involving deformed or lower-class infants. Preoccupied with the Fairhaven case, Simon is at first unwilling to see these as more than instances of the widespread maternal neglect so prevalent among the poor. Soon, however, he realizes that their unusual characteristics mark them as murders and, with Murdoch's help, he begins to pursue these crimes as well.

Simon is particularly ambivalent about the baby deaths because he himself, the father of six, has a Mongoloid (Down Syndrome) young daughter, Emily. It was during the birth of this child that his wife died, and Simon still blames Emily for his loss. He has never been able to bond with Emily, although she is an endearing child. Indeed, although previously a source of joy, he now feels alienated from his large family, consisting (in addition to Emily) of his oldest daughter Rebecca, the “little mother”; the aspiring proper English miss Miriam, who repudiates the “tribalism” of her Judaism; the twins Sarah, who wants to be a scientist, and David, who wants to be an explorer; and the temperamental, artistic Naomi. The family also includes Simon’s father Zadok, a widower who frequently argues about his non-traditional choice of profession and his lack of religious observance. This brood is brought into some semblance of order by the combined efforts of the Wise’s gentile maid, Martha, and Hannah Adler, a cousin of Rachel’s who has lived with the family for the past several years. Plain but intelligent, Hannah is more than a little in love with Simon, who is apparently oblivious to her attentions.

Hannah’s is not the only unrequited love associated with the Wise household. Unbeknownst to Simon, the lovely and gentle Rebecca is being secretly courted by Michael Talbot, a young physician specializing in the emerging specialty of pediatrics, who has a special interest in the disabilities of childhood and has consulted with the Hannah and Rebecca about Emily, in the process becoming a family friend.. Rebecca is enchanted by the charming, enthusiastic doctor, but worries that she is too young to marry, and worse, that Talbot is not Jewish. While her father seems to have turned his back on religion, Rebecca knows such a marriage would violate her dead mother’s deepest wishes for her eldest daughter to remain within the faith.

As the baby deaths investigation progresses, evidence from an unscrupulous midwife and the unctuous proprietor of a lying-in hospital begins to point in the direction of Oliver Brantley, Dr. Talbot’s crippled assistant. Brantley, deferentially obedient to the doctor who pulled him out of the gutter, apparently resents the time and energies Talbot puts into his pediatric practice, and may be supplementing his meager income by doing business in unwanted babies. As Simon and Murdoch begin to close in on Brantley, a stunning piece of evidence links the two investigations. Simon’s brilliant detection leads to the conclusion that one perpetrator is responsible for both the Fairhaven and baby murders. Simon and Murdoch confront Dr. Talbot with their suspicions. Talbot initially defends his assistant, but then offers information which is potentially incriminating to Brantley. However, Brantley himself eludes their grasp, in the process knocking Simon unconscious. Murdoch pursues the suspect alone, and is subsequently murdered by Brantley, who then commits suicide.

Simon, devastated at the loss of his friend, also feels uneasy about the case, although Superintendent Walker has publicly announced Brantley’s responsibility for both crimes. In guilt and anger, Simon methodically reanalyzes the Fairhaven murder, simultaneously questioning his obsession with Sir Gregory, Walker’s desire to incriminate Rothstein, and the sudden emergence of Brantley as a convenient double solution. He realizes that certain facts gleaned from the Fairhaven autopsy make it impossible for Brantley to have

committed at least this crime. As Simon continues to ponder various events connected with the two cases, he perceives that Dr. Talbot himself had far better means and motive to commit both the Fairhaven and the baby murders than had his poor assistant.

Rushing to arrest Michael Talbot, Simon is too late. Indeed, Talbot, in the clutches of full-blown mania, has decided that Emily, as a inferior creature, must die, and that he himself will elope with Rebecca to America, after converting her to the more respectable religion of Christianity. The first step in this wild scheme is to kidnap both Rebecca and Emily, which he does, leaving the horror-stricken Hannah to convey this development to Simon as he hastily returns home. Simon pursues the trio to a deserted bandstand in St. James Park, while Hannah alerts the authorities. In a final confrontation, Talbot produces a twisted rationale for his deeds, anchored in the emerging pseudo-science of eugenics. As Walker's constables light up the park with their bull's-eye lanterns, a struggle ensues, in which Simon, wounded with the same knife that murdered Lady Alicia, successfully subdues Talbot and rescues his daughters.

In the denouement, Rothstein appears to renounce his sinful ways. As penance, he tells Simon he is using his vast fortune to bring health and happiness to most of the other characters, including offering a financial incentive to persuade Sir Gregory to abandon his pending lawsuit against Simon for unjustified harassment. Simon himself reflects on the tumultuous events of the past several weeks, in which he has doggedly battled the stupidity of his superiors, the arrogance of the upper classes, the suspicion of the lower classes, his own flawed nature, and even the omnipresent London fog. To his surprise, he realizes that, in the process of solving these crimes, he has recommitted himself to the perennial struggle against evil, and reconnected with his family, even with Emily. Through the difficult process of recommitting to life (*l'chaim*), his heart has been opened and he has found an unexpected redemption.