

presidency. He dissects at length Barack Obama's views on affirmative action, a subject that has become supremely relevant owing to the President's recent nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court. Sailer suggests that Obama's interest in supporting his racial "team" may have faded, and that Obama may have evolved beyond the persona he projected in *Dreams of My Father*. Perhaps ambition overwhelmed his youthful race obsession, or he may simply have grown up. (The Sotomayor nomination may serve as evidence to the contrary.) And Sailer argues that Obama will reserve the revelation of his true self for a second term:

In Obama, ambition and caution are yoked. Becoming president is not his ultimate objective. Becoming a two-term president is. Republican Richard Nixon's first Administration was one of the most liberal in American history. There were hints at the beginning of his second term, before Watergate washed every bit of policy coherence away, that Nixon, having safely won re-election, intended to move toward his innate conservatism. That analogy suggests that a second Obama administration might more truly reflect the real Obama.

This is a dubious prediction. Certainly Obama has noticed that recent second presidential terms have been mired in scandal. If he is to accomplish anything, he needs to act while he has the votes in Congress and the support of the public. He cannot count on having those in four years. Unless arrogance has already overwhelmed his intelligence (a possibility, to be sure), the President knows this. In the case of those who succumb to arrogance, reality has a way of intruding on their best-laid plans. Not even a "half-blood prince," once hailed by Oprah as "The One," is exempt from this law.

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## Unnatural Causes

by Wayne Allensworth

### The Private Patient

by P.D. James

New York: Alfred A. Knopf;  
352 pp., \$25.95



"For me," wrote P.D. James in her "fragment of autobiography," *Time To Be in Earnest*, "one of the fascinations of detective fiction is the exploration of character under the revealing trauma of murder inquiry." Murder "is the unique crime, the only one for which we can never make reparation to the victim." As a writer who concentrates on character development, James is drawn to the mystery genre precisely because a death by unnatural causes (*Unnatural Causes* is the title of one of her earlier novels featuring the Scotland Yard detective and poet Adam Dalgliesh) "destroys privacy, both of the living and of the dead." Murder "forces us to confront who we are and what we are capable of being." Small wonder, then, that murder "has fascinated writers and readers since Cain murdered Abel." And for more than 46 years, since the publication of her debut novel, *Cover Her Face*, P.D. James has ably used the mystery genre to explore human nature through the characters in her books.

At 88 James has given us one of her strongest efforts, writing with depth and clarity, as well as with an elegance seldom seen in an era of postmodern scribbling. She has also broken new ground, showing readers that advanced age does not necessarily mean decreased skills or intellectual curiosity. Reading James' later books, one is reminded that age was once associated with increased gravity and wisdom.

In *The Private Patient*, James remains superficially true to form as a traditional teller of mystery stories in a distinctive English style. The setting is Cheverell Manor in the Dorset countryside, a temporary retreat for the patients of a well-known plastic surgeon, George Chandler-Powell. Investigative jour-

nalist Rhoda Gradwyn, facially disfigured at a young age, a disfigurement that has also left her emotionally and spiritually scarred, arrives as Chandler-Powell's latest "private patient." As expected in a James novel, even the minor characters are fully drawn. Each has a story that makes him interesting to the reader: greed, hopes, dreams, revenge, and love drive them all to play their parts in the story. Gradwyn herself, following a watershed event in her life, has decided to have her disfigurement corrected by Chandler-Powell, who wonders why the successful journalist has waited so long to have the procedure done. At an initial meeting with the plastic surgeon, Gradwyn reflects on the scarring that has driven her most of her life:

There was a moment in which, not touching the scar, he scrutinized it in silence. Then he switched off the light and sat again behind the desk. His eyes on the file before him, he said, "How long ago was this done?"

She was struck by the phrasing of the question. "Thirty-four years ago."

"How did it happen?"

She said, "Is that a necessary question?"

"Not unless it was self-inflicted. I assume it wasn't."

"No, it wasn't self-inflicted."

"And you have waited thirty-four years to do something about it. Why now, Miss Gradwyn?"

There was a pause; then she said, "Because I no longer have need of it."

In this way, James sets up the story, with many of its characters scarred in some way, some of them seeking redemption as best they can in a post-Christian society. This is a theme James has built on from the beginning of her literary career. Dalgliesh is the son of an Anglican priest, a man with an interest in church architecture who sometimes touches on spiritual questions in his pursuit of a knowable truth in a world that seems increasingly chaotic. He lost his wife in child-

birth years before, and the introspective poet has decided to remarry as he approaches the end of his career.

Gradwyn is murdered by strangulation following her operation, and Dalglish's Scotland Yard team, which is assigned to especially sensitive or difficult homicides, uses the conventions of detective fiction (examining the body, interrogating those living at the manor, theorizing with regard to the murder) to advance the story. In the manor, small dramas unfold as the cast of characters is confronted with "who we are and what we are capable of being." At stake are the fate of the manor and clinic, the relationships between the various characters, an inheritance, and the success of Dalglish and his team in their attempt to restore order against the disorderly background of the murder, which is soon followed by another.

James frequently transposes modern institutions and structures (Scotland Yard, a nuclear power station) with symbols of the past (an abbey, a church), stressing the continuity of human traits and contrasting the increasing uncertainty of the 21st century with earlier periods marked by tradition, custom, and religious faith and ceremony. In *The Private Patient*, she further expresses her distress and pessimism in the face of a world that no longer seems to make sense, in which the forces of disorder, so long held at bay by prophets, priests, and the likes of Adam Dalglish, seem to be winning out. Gradwyn, for instance, while attending the marriage of her long-widowed mother, makes the following observations:

*She thought, I don't belong here, I'm not happy with them, nor they with me. Their embarrassed mutual politeness can't bridge the gap between us. But this is where I came from, these are my people . . . that amorphous, unregarded group who fought the country's wars, paid their taxes, clung to what remained of their traditions. They had lived to see their simple patriotism derided, their morality despised, their savings devalued. They caused no trouble. Millions of pounds of*

public money wasn't regularly siphoned into their neighbourhoods in the hope of bribing, cajoling or coercing them into civic virtue. If they protested that their cities had become alien, their children taught in over-crowded schools where 90 per cent of the children spoke no English, they were lectured about the cardinal sin of racism by those more expensively and comfortably circumstanced.

This story does not end with all the loose ends tied up, in the tradition of the English mystery. Though the case is officially closed, Dalglish does not believe that the full truth has been uncovered, that he has truly restored order. In a world without set boundaries, he is confronted with people who must set their own, and who wonder whether the truth will set them free:

Dalglish said, "I accept that, given the confession, nothing more can reasonably be done. But I don't like unfinished business. I needed to know if I was right . . . Now I know the truth in so far as it can be known . . . Or is that too arrogant a claim?"

"To know the truth and to understand it? Yes, with respect, Commander, I think it is. An arrogance and, perhaps, an impertinence . . ."

The book includes a note of hope, however faint, for the character pondering a heinous crime amid the ruins:

*She thought, The world is a beautiful and terrible place. Deeds of horror are committed every minute and in the end those we love die. If the screams of all earth's living creatures were one scream of pain, surely it would shake the stars. But we have love. It may seem a frail defence against the horrors of the world, but we must hold fast and believe in it, for it is all we have.*

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## A Measured But Practical Hope

by Lloyd E. Gross

**The Tyranny of Liberalism: Understanding and Overcoming Administered Freedom, Inquisitorial Tolerance, and Equality by Command**

by James Kalb

Wilmington, DE: ISI Books; 330 pp., \$28.00



If man is the measure, it cannot be right to tell him what to do. We cannot be forced to be free or ordered to be equal. Neither theoretical refinements nor practical compromises can resolve such basic contradictions or keep them from leading to unprincipled and irrational conduct that eventually proves self-destructive.

Savor that felicitous prose. It is a sample of what awaits those who read James Kalb's *The Tyranny of Liberalism*, 289 pages of text followed by ample documentation and references. Kalb says what many of us have not been quite able to articulate. He identifies the cracks in the foundation on which modern liberal sensibilities rest, cracks which all of us knew had to be there, but found difficult to spot.

Kalb loves language. There is a poignancy to his lamentation of its pre-empting by the Newspeak of the New World Order. His description of how liberals use the terms *toleration*, *inclusion*, and *rationality* can liberate even one educated in post-1960's public schools, unless those institutions were successful in destroying his ability to think critically.

Kalb also loves tradition. He correctly assesses liberalism as a rejection of tradition, and with it the unwritten principles, many of which are based on religion, that allow people to live in the real world. Kalb accepts the Christian doctrine of Original Sin,