

# Sailing Super Sleuths

By Joella D. Hultgren

While we were sailing on the great ship Queen Elizabeth 2 recently, we frequently visited the extensive library and the next - door book shop on board the famous liner. I came across a mystery paperback, Murder On The QE2, featuring the highly successful television sleuth and mystery author, Jessica Fletcher. The book caught my attention for two reasons: one, the murder mystery takes place on a transatlantic sailing of the Queen Elizabeth 2, and two, my mother is a devoted fan of the "Murder, She Wrote" television programs, now in syndication, and Mom would enjoy reading this paperback. What I didn't discover until beginning to read the mystery, was that Jessica Fletcher enlists the creative and impressive skills of a fellow female passenger to solve the murders (and an additional *attempted* murder) in the style of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John H. Watson.

What a treat, and what a delight! As in the television programs, the stage is filled with a multitude of interesting and singular characters --- an actress attempting to make a comeback, a garlic - loving television chef who has an axe to grind (or is it a cleaver to grind?), an eighty - year - old mountain climber, an unpleasant author of gardening books, a judge from an infamous celebrity murder trial, a television network owner and his starlet

trophy - wife, various actors, journalists, musicians, law enforcement folks, and a full complement of the Ship's officers, staff personnel, and crew.

WHEW! I used a notebook to help keep track of the characters, and discovered a curious fact (which I'll mention at the end of the review)\*.

Soon after the ship sails, the first body is found. Fortunately, mystery writer / amateur detective Jessica Fletcher has already made friends with a woman, Mary Alice Ward, who is sailing on the Queen Elizabeth 2 because she has won first prize in a mystery contest sponsored by her local bookstore. Mrs. Ward discovers the body. In fact, Mrs. Ward is very good at noticing things, making astute observations about fellow passengers (who soon become suspicious suspects), searching for clues, developing plausible reasons for unusual events, and solving mysteries. Because the crossing is a mere five days, and actions and the solution must happen quickly, the entire book moves at a fast pace. It's hard to put down.

But here's the tricky bit. As most readers would, I assumed that Jessica Fletcher would take the role of Sherlock Holmes, and Mary Ward would be John Watson. In fact, early on, sleuth Jessica Fletcher states, "I felt a little like Sherlock Holmes, Mary Ward my Dr. Watson." A little later, Mrs. Fletcher thinks to herself ".....I considered her a partner of sorts. Besides, she was obviously someone with a keen interest in such things,

who'd want to be kept abreast of developments." A journalist asks Jessica if Mary Ward is a mystery writer, and Jessica replies, "No. But she could be."

Jessica "Holmes" Fletcher consults and discusses all aspects of the case with Mary "Watson" Ward. Whatever Jessica discovers, she shares with Mary. Whatever Mary Ward learns or reveals, she discusses with Jessica. They have meal time talks, deck - walking talks, midnight work sessions, and quickly form a close partnership à la Holmes and Watson.

But something changes. Slowly but steadily, Mary Ward becomes the dominant investigator. Having been the first to discover the body, Mrs. Ward continues to increase her orchestrating role by reminding Jessica Fletcher about clues, things she has seen, and comments she has heard. Mary Ward develops the final theory and is largely instrumental in naming the murderer. Mrs. Ward, like Sherlock Holmes, has a wonderful memory of past crimes, and leads Jessica Fletcher to the appropriate research material. When Jessica asks for Mary's help in the final quarter of the book, she says, "Come on, Dr. Watson. We have some more talking to do." However, at this point, I think the roles have been absolutely reversed! Mary Ward becomes the leader of the duo, and Jessica Fletcher, writer that she is, becomes the chronicler, à la Watson!

Jessica says that Mary ".....developed a theory.....and laid it out for

me with clarity and precision.....Her deductive powers were as impressive as her physical resilience." Later, Mrs. Fletcher talks about Mary Ward to a nationally known journalist. ".....her reasoning, coupled with an uncanny ability to see physical similarities in people, was compelling." It also helps to form the Jessica Fletcher - John Watson association when you learn that Mrs. Fletcher spends a great deal of her sailing time typing on her cabin computer, writing announcements for the ship's daily bulletin, writing items reporting on the murder, and writing a play which becomes the dénouement of the murder mystery. Dr. John H. Watson would be pleased with her writing skills and chronicling of this "adventure" and its solution.

Jessica "Watson" Fletcher gives final praise for her new friend and partner Mary "Holmes" Ward with "I've never met anyone quite like her. She picked up on every subtlety, every nuance, and created a scenario that proved to be true." Doesn't that sound like Watson describing Holmes? The roles of these two female sleuths switched in the five short days of the sailing.

The director of a mystery play that Jessica Fletcher wrote for the crossing calls the fictional detective in her play, "the Sherlock Holmes of the North Atlantic". This same detective concludes Mrs. Fletcher's play with "Elementary, my dear audience."

\*Finally, I mentioned above about the long list of characters in the story. I discovered a HUGE NUMBER of names beginning with "M" or "W"! To be sure of my instinctual observation, I made a frequency count of the initials of all the names (first and last) included in the story. There were 135 names in all (including a few place names), 27 "M's" and 13 "W's"! The "M's" were: Maine, Malone, Manager, Manhattan, Mara, Marcus, Marla, Marlene, Marwick, Mary, Matt, Matthau, Matthew, Mauretania, McCluskey, Metzger, Michael, Mike, Millard, Miller, Mogul, Monroe, Montrose, Morris, Morrow, Morton, and Mose. In the "W" column are: Wainscott, Waldorf, Walker, Wallace, Wally, Walter (2), Ward (3), Warren, Welby, Worrell.

So, what's with the "M's"? Certainly, this is a Murder Mystery. Consider some of the "M's" in the Sherlock Holmes literature --- Moriarty, Mycroft, Moran, Mazarin, Missing (as in "Three - Quarter"), and Musgrave. The "W's" are represented by Watson, Wisteria, Wilmer, and Wontner. And of course, an "M" is an upside - down "W"! Interestingly enough, Jessica Fletcher was told her cabin computer was loaded with Microsoft Word, and we know she used the "World Wide Web" for research. The only two songs mentioned that the ship's orchestra played are "Moonlight in Vermont" and "Moonglow". And of course, Mary Ward has both an "M" and a "W". Think about it.....the BSI and we "Illustrious Clients" also have our own

Mike Whelan, the head man of the Baker Street Irregulars!

This book is a fun diversion --- entertaining and easy to read;  
however, the solution and the naming of the culprits are not at all  
transparent.

P. S. My mother enjoyed the mystery, as well!