

An Expert in Murder by Nicola Upson. faber and faber 2008.

Nicola Upson has taken as the central character in this wonderfully Christie-esque whodunit, the novelist Josephine Tey. Josephine Tey was the pen name of Elizabeth Macintosh, and using it she published several acclaimed mystery novels, featuring a police inspector called Alan Grant. Using a male pen name she wrote two dozen short and full length plays, one of which, Richard of Bordeaux, which starred John Gielgud, ran for fourteen months.

Against the backdrop of the end of the run of Richard, Nicola Upson sets her evocative book, and Tey, together with a police inspector called Archie Penrose, find themselves involved in a murder enquiry which comes frighteningly close to Tey herself.

An Expert in Murder is rich in characters, notably the theatre people - impresarios, stage managers, actors and designers - around whom much of the story revolves, and also the police. Upson's writing is authentically 'of the period' and vibrates with sexual ambiguity, though the melodrama of one scene seemed not quite to match the high standard of the rest. That tiny niggle apart this is a hugely enjoyable read, and hopefully sets the stage for a slew of novels featuring DI Archie Penrose, and possibly Josephine Tey.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh