**Mary Kelly (1927-2017)**

‘overhead, a wide marine sky embossed with pearly clouds, and the slow plumes of the cement works’ chimneys; through the windscreen, concrete posts and barbed wire half swamped by chalk-dusted thickets; and behind the fence, breaking the surface of the grey undulations like a bathers’ warning, a red rust-pitted disc: Police Advice – Danger, Keep Out.’

*\_Due to a Death\_*

Mary Theresa Coolican was born in London in 1927, but met her future husband Denis Kelly while studying English at Edinburgh University. The couple were married in 1950 and after graduation went into teaching, with Mary’s first job being at the Convent of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Beckenham. She was inspired to write \_Due to a Death\_ (1962) after a holiday with Denis in Greenhithe, which they spent unsuccessfully looking for orchids. Another Londoner with more than one foot in Kent, [Julian Symons](/20c/20c-symons-biography/) was struck by the evocative setting while finding the narrator ‘tediously hysterical’. An article in \_The Times\_ commented perceptively in 1969 that Mary Kelly’s fictional crimes were ‘not so much quick clean thrusts as concealed haemorrhages cruelly spreading.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Editor of the British Library Crime series [Martin Edwards](/21c/21c-edwards-sepulchre-street) has described her as an ‘enigma’. But why did Kelly, whose 1961 novel \_The Spoilt Kill\_ had just won her a Golden Dagger award from the Crime Writers’ Association, risk setting her next work in a small coastal town backing onto a cement works?

The seaside resort had been a favourite setting for fictional crime since the nineteenth century. Authors such as [Mary Braddon](/19c/19c-braddon-biography/) and [Wilkie Collins](/19c/19c-collins-biography/) were quick to sense the possibilities of deserted holiday towns: autumn sunlight peeling drearily off gaudily painted house-fronts, the pier like an empty stage set scrubbed raw by an indifferent sea. But this subversive image only works because of the reader’s own investment in the summer holiday – imagining the same town as vibrant theatre where anything could happen, with the added excitement of knowing that nothing is quite what it seems…

With the slow decay of the UK holiday industry in the second half of the twentieth century writers later writers looked back to this Victorian heritage across an insuperable divide. If the renowned resorts such as [Margate](/19c/19c-margate) and [Folkestone](/19c/19c-folkestone/) had been undermined by decades of neglect, a small town on the Medway can be presented in almost parodic terms. In \_Due to a Death\_ the fictional Gunfleet is ‘lapped by the river, sequestered in trees, half a mile from the road… a decaying village, a single street stricken since Trafalgar, an air lock in time’[[2]](#footnote-2) The bus from the nearby towns of Shayle and Culham only goes through Gunfleet every two hours and the narrator is scathing about its:

sole amenity. The promenade. A half-mile strip of parched grass, embellished with ornate Edwardian benches from which the white paint was flaking, cast-offs of some thriving resort, a bargain to assure the poor of Gunfleet that they were not neglected[.][[3]](#footnote-3)

In this unpromising setting the marital frustrations of the female characters do nothing to draw them together; rather than illicit escape, the familiar tropes of adultery and murder simply intensify the narrator’s feeling that she is trapped in a nightmare of her own choosing. When the truth is finally revealed it is less dramatic and yet more horrible than she had feared.

**Bibliography**

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1. ‘Pooter’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \_Due to a Death\_ 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. \_Due to a Death\_ 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)