

The Circular Staircase Short Guide

The Circular Staircase by Mary Roberts Rinehart

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Characters

The character of Miss Rachel Innes dominates the action of *The Circular Staircase*. Although she appears in only this one novel, she is the prototype for many of Rinehart's heroines, most notably "Tish," Miss Letitia Carberry, one of Rinehart's most popular creations. Not only does she face one terrifying event after the other with absolute equanimity, but she also takes great delight in her ability to do so.

She is clear-sighted and practical, able to deal with murder and mayhem on the same terms as she does the more mundane distractions of the social lives of her young niece and nephew. She also exhibits genuine regret when the situation is resolved, and she must return to her ordinary existence.

Liddy, Miss Rachel's maid, is the flighty, easily-frightened female who embodies stereotypical views of women's behavior. Miss Rachel's niece and nephew, Gertrude and Halsey, not only provide her with a surrogate family but also allow for gentle satiric commentary on the amusements of young people in upper-middle-class society.

Social Concerns/Themes

While Rinehart's comments on social issues would later be eagerly sought by the readers of mass market magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, in her early novels she concentrated almost entirely on plot and character. Yet *The Circular Staircase* is not devoid of an interest in the limitations of the author's own upper-middle-class environment. Its main character, Miss Rachel Innes, is a spinster, an anomalous figure in a society which saw wife and mother as the only acceptable roles for a woman. Most spinsters were financially dependent and condemned to stereotypically feminine (and low-paying) occupations such as teachers, nurses, shop clerks, and office workers.

The fictional Miss Rachel Innes is released from those constraints in *The Circular Staircase* and is free to use her intelligence and insight to unravel the complexities of the situations in which she finds herself. The more traditional roles are represented in the novel both by Miss Rachel's timid maid Liddy and by her teen-age niece Gertrude. Rinehart herself had longed to study medicine as a girl but was forced by family finances as well as social convention to train as a nurse. In her novels she liberates her female characters from the constraints placed upon them by their gender. There is also a great deal of witty commentary on that new social phenomenon — the automobile — one of which is owned by Miss Rachel's nephew Halsey.

As with all her detective novels, Rinehart's *The Circular Staircase* is concerned with the reaction of ordinary people who become innocently embroiled in situations beyond their control. Miss Rachel rents a summerhouse which turns out to have a secret room in which the proceeds from a bank robbery have been hidden. While her maid Liddy cowers in the background, Miss Rachel rises to the occasion in typical intrepid amateur sleuth fashion.

While Rinehart's approach is comic, the examination of human reactions in the face of unexpected horror is serious.



Techniques

All of Rinehart's detective novels were to follow the pattern set by *The Circular Staircase*. The initial crime is only the first in a series of violent events which strike the characters throughout the novel. Other elements introduced in this novel include the infamous "Had-I-But-Known" narrative technique, where the first person narrator laments that, based on hindsight, she would have acted very differently; the blending of romantic subplots with the main mystery story line; the use of humor; and the shifting of attention from the detective to the victims and villains involved in the crime.

Rinehart also borrows a number of gothic elements for *The Circular Staircase*. It is set in Sunnyside, a rambling old mansion on Long Island, full of hidden rooms, secret passages, and things that "go bump in the night."

The name of the house is, of course, ironic. While its surface appearance is benign, its interior hides great evil. The novel also features a middle-of-the-night disinterment in a cemetery, another direct borrowing from the gothic tradition.

Adaptations

The first film version of *The Circular Staircase* appeared in 1915. A television version appeared on CBS's *Climax!*

series in 1954. More well-known, however, are the motion pictures and television productions based on Rinehart's own adaptation of the novel for the stage as *The Bat*, one of the most commercially successful mystery dramas ever written. Rinehart and Avery Hopgood adapted *The Circular Staircase* for the stage under this title in 1920. Miss Rachel Innes became Miss Cornelia Van Horder; her maid Liddy was renamed Lizzie. The initial Broadway run of *The Bat* lasted for two years. (A 1953 revival with Zasu Pitts as Lizzie was nearly as successful, and after the play closed, Pitts starred in a television version.) To capitalize on the success of her play, Rinehart allowed Stephen Vincent Benet to fictionalize *The Bat*, and it was republished as a separate novel in 1926. The stage version of *The Bat* was used as the basis for a silent film in 1926, followed by a United Artists sound version with the title *The Bat Whispers* in 1930. The film was remade in 1959 by Allied Artists with Agnes Moorehead as Miss Van Horder and Vincent Price as "the Bat." The following year Helen Hayes and Jason Robards, Jr., were featured in a Dow Great Mystery Series television production of *The Bat*.

Literary Precedents

The Circular Staircase is clearly a descendant of the fifty years of detective stories which preceded it. It is probably no coincidence that BobbsMerrill, the publishers of the novel, had also published Anna Katherine Greene's *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), exactly thirty years earlier. Greene also created a female detective, Violet Strange, now long forgotten. Although Rinehart writes firmly in the detective tradition of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, she shifts the focus from the eccentric detective with almost supernatural powers of detection to an ordinary person caught up in a situation in which she must call on her powers of common sense to deal with the problem in front of her. While earlier practitioners of the genre had portrayed women in their more typical role as victim, Rinehart made her detective a woman. While it is true she is an unusual one, being free from the restrictions she would have faced had she been tied down with the responsibilities of caring for a husband and children, she is a woman nonetheless.



Related Titles

The spinster detective Rinehart creates in *The Circular Staircase* is clearly a forerunner of one of her most popular characters, the heroine of the longlived "Tish" series. Miss Letitia Carberry first appeared in a short story written in 1910 and then in more short stories and a series of books: *The Amazing Adventures of Letitia Carberry* (1911); *Tish* (1916); *More Tish* (1921); *Tish Plays the Game* (1926); *The Book of Tish* (1931); *Tish Marches On* (1937); and *The Best of Tish* (1955). The *Saturday Evening Post* printed every new "Tish" story for over thirty years. While exceptionally popular, these stories usually have very little to do with the solution of a mystery. Their interest lies in the comic character of Tish, a spinster of indeterminate age who travels about the United States and Europe, encountering any number of off-beat and sometimes improbable situations which her own blend of morality and silliness always sees her through.

The Circular Staircase is also related to the "Miss Pinkerton" stories which feature Rinehart's other female detective, Nurse Hilda Adams. "Miss Pinkerton" is given her nickname by the police themselves because of her ability to solve crimes that elude them. Although "Miss Pinkerton" is cast in the same mold as Miss Rachel Innes and "Tish," she is a more realistic character. Rinehart obviously has drawn on her own youthful experiences as a nurse and her own advice to young writers: "If you are a housewife living in the South, why try to tell a story of French Colonials in North Africa?" The character first appeared in the short story "The Buckled Bag" in 1925 and then in the novel *Miss Pinkerton* (1932).

Her adventures continue in a series of novels over the next fifteen years, ending with *Haunted Lady* (1942). The "Miss Pinkerton" stories present the curious proposition that because of the special role a nurse plays in her patients' lives, she has the right to take advantage of their weaknesses, both physical and moral, to expose their guilt. This, according to Rinehart, allows the nurse to be more highly effective at solving crimes than, for example, other professionals such as physicians and the police who are bound by legal and ethical codes. Since the character of Hilda Adams is clearly autobiographical, this view of the relative roles of nurse and physician undoubtedly reflects Rinehart's own experiences, as well as those of her readers, as repugnant as it may be to contemporary thinking.

The final Rinehart series which is related to *The Circular Staircase* features "Bab the Sub-Deb." Bab is an adolescent version of Letitia Carberry. Barbara Putnam Archibald narrates her wild adventures through the medium of the misspelled and ungrammatical essays written in response to her English assignments. In the "Sub-Deb" stories Rinehart is able to give full rein to her sense of the absurd. Although they are wonderfully comic, they also allow Rinehart to portray quite accurately the emotional life of an adolescent girl in all her wild enthusiasm and uncertainties.



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