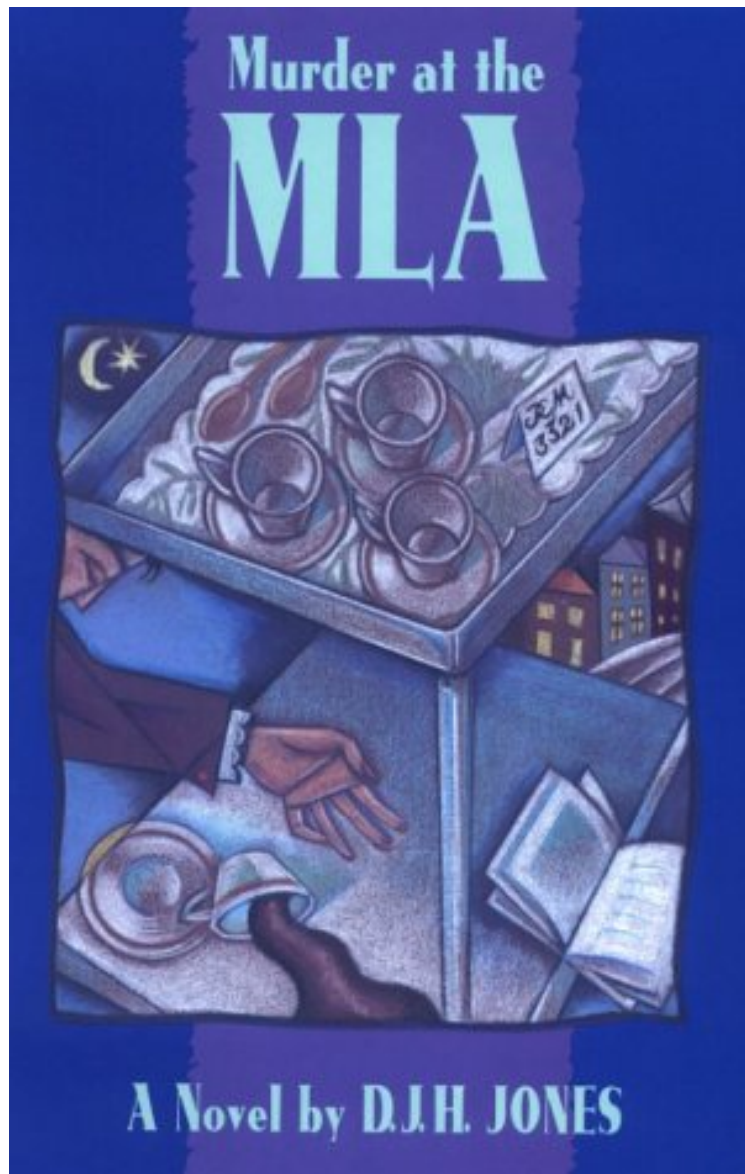


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## Murder at the MLA

*D. J. H. Jones*

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**D. J. H. Jones : Murder at the MLA** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Murder at the MLA:

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. murder as a sidebar By William Chaisson This book is only ostensibly a murder mystery, and is actually an excuse for the pseudonymous author to savage the prevailing subcultural norms of the academy. And I say 'more power to her!' And I am merely guessing at the gender of the

author. The murders themselves are often thrust into the background for pages on end as Boaz Dixon, homicide detective, and Nancy Cook, assistant professor of English at Yale, discuss the dysfunctional social structure and behavior of professors of English and comparative literature. When I started reading the book I was hoping that it would be more of a satire of post-modern posing among academics and that theme is in here, but "Jones" has a broader axe to grind and lets Prof. Cook lay into many aspects of the academic life. Cook's jeremiads on academia are made a believable part of the plot by the author's description of how very foreign the social norms and jargon of the academic community are to Dixon, a working class kid from Chicago with two years of college in his distant past. You can see that he really does need to know all of this in order to solve the crimes that have taken place in this community. The scene where Prof. Cook explains the manipulative placement of the coffee cart in a room where an interview takes place is hilarious precisely because it is so true and so barbaric. The writing is occasionally uneven, but the passages that involve interaction between Dixon and Cook are funny, suggestive and deftly paced. The descriptions of the Chicago cops and the English professors are also very funny, but perhaps relied a bit too much on stereotyping. I never stopped caring about how the plot would develop (i.e., who killed these professors?), but I was much more interested in who Boaz Dixon and Nancy Cook were and how their relationship would (or would not) develop. This book has helped me (an academic) remember how to explain what I do and why I do it to my numerous non-academic friends. For that I thank D.J.H. Jones, whoever s/he is. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A satire that still resonates. By CustomerA friend gave me a copy of this book when I finished my Ph.D. exams so I'd have reason to laugh at the absurdities within my profession. While this is not as successful a novel as David Lodge's *Small World*, it still works well. Save for a few significant developments in the world and in the field (e.g., the attacks of September 11, the rise of the Web, etc.), it applies fully today. While some of the specific persons lampooned here have moved on to other realms, academic or otherwise, the types and the behaviors remain the same. It's not just for academicians, either; those outside the academy will find the habits of the professoriat hilarious, to say the least, and perhaps worthy of empathy (or pity).

As a Chicago homicide detective, Boaz Dixon has just about seen it all--or so he thinks until corpses begin accumulating at the Hotel Fairfax during the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. The investigation takes him into a world unlike any he has ever encountered--the byzantine milieu of the contemporary academy, with its arcane jargon, endless posturings, power struggles, and puzzling factionalisms. To get to the bottom of these murders, Boaz decides to enlist some assistance. Enter Nancy Cook, a bright and resourceful assistant prof from Yale, whom Boaz quickly recruits as his guide and translator. With Nancy inserting her specific slant on things, Boaz and his fellow cops can confront the baffling questions in the case. Why had the Wellesley department chair, Susan Engleton, collapsed in her hotel suite, her skirt up and a run in her stocking, never to preside over hiring interviews for her school again? And Michael Alcott, the University of Arizona's formidable purveyor of the latest trends in critical theory: why had his body plummeted ten floors to the atrium lobby, there to lie for hours and spoil a pretty patch of terrazzo? Was this the work of a disgruntled hotel staff member, out to get even with his employer? Or could the culprit--or culprits--come from the ranks of the assembled academics? And, the most disturbing question of all: will the mayhem continue? With numerous twists of plot and an affectionate evocation of Chicago, the City That Hates Wimps, *Murder at the MLA* is at once a deftly designed mystery and a rambunctious satire of today's academy. Beneath the novel's surgical wit, however, lies a serious concern for academic priorities, including the status of teaching and the curriculum in the currently beleaguered world of higher education. Of course, any resemblance to prominent academic figures and to well-known institutions is purely coincidental.

From Publishers Weekly English instructors and other academics, tenured and not, will howl at the pseudonymous Jones's skewering of the politics of college teaching in this procedural set at the annual Christmastime meeting of the Modern Language Association. Nancy Cook, an assistant professor at Yale, knows she's off the tenure track, so she's at the meeting in Chicago to check out the meat market in anticipation of her next year's job search. Instead, Chicago police detective Boaz Dixon enlists her help in understanding the MLA and its members so he can find the killer who poisoned one professor and who may have murdered another, who fell to his death from a 10th floor balcony. Giving Boaz a contextual understanding of the organization, Nancy explains Deconstructionism, new and old literary philosophies, the positions of Tweeds, Trendies and Marxist-materialists and the power struggle among them all. Then another scholar is shot to death, and suspicions tighten on the MLA membership. A little romance spices the narrative, which includes a review course on literary criticism and an illuminating, irreverent inside look at the world of academic politics. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Kirkus Six thousand literature teachers and grad students convene in Chicago for the annual Modern Language Association convention, then watch their numbers diminish alarmingly as the entire Wellesley hiring committee is poisoned (one fatality) and detestable deconstructionist Michael Alcott (U. of Arizona) is pushed over an atrium ledge while craning to see Jacques Derrida--with more victims still to be scheduled. Homicide cop Boaz Dixon, feeling unaccountably lost amid the tide of academics, recruits nontenured Nancy Cook (Yale) to give him an extended orientation on the profession's woes,

punctuated by broad caricatures of luminaries from Camille Paglia to Harold Bloom. Unfortunatley, the prospect of further homicides among such a babbling, social-climbing, power-hungry ship of fools turns out to be much less fun than it sounds. Amateurish brainwork, far-fetched conclusions, sophomoric gossip- -not unlike the MLA itself. Fans of David Lodge's satires and Robert Barnard's academic mysteries will regret pseudonymous Jones's missed opportunities. -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. "English instructors and other academics, tenured and not, will howl at the pseudonymous Jones's skewering of the politics of college teaching in this procedural set at the annual Christmastime meeting of the Modern Language Association. . . . A little romance spices the narrative, which includes a review course on literary criticism and an illuminating, irreverent inside look at the world of academic politics."--Publishers Weekly