

A Rumpole Christmas

By John Mortimer, Viking, New York, 161 pages, \$ 21.95

Reviewed by Ronald W. Meister

The perils of posthumous publishing are prevalent and predictable. For every late author's *Confederacy of Dunces*, there is a dreary *Silmarillion*; for every *Northanger Abbey*, something like Steinbeck's *King Arthur and His Noble Knights*. Rare indeed is the secret writer like Emily Dickinson, whose best work was published after death. Tolkien and Steinbeck presumably knew enough to leave their lesser works in the drawer, and Mark Twain asked that his literary remains be burned, but their publishers thought otherwise, and their reputations are none the better for it.

The prodigiously prolific John Mortimer, author of fifteen volumes of stories about the loveable Old Bailey hack Horace Rumpole, and three dozen other works of fiction, memoir, drama and essay, shuffled off this mortal coil in January, apparently leaving no briefs unfiled. Having averaged more than a book a year for his last three decades, Sir John left a void in his publishers' fall list. They have chosen to fill it by collecting five short works under the title *A Rumpole Christmas*, all featuring the sage of Pommeroy's Wine Bar and bearing some more or less attenuated relation to the holiday season. These are actually prehumous publications, having appeared in British newspapers and magazines from 1997 to 2006, but someone must have considered them unworthy of inclusion in the half dozen volumes of Rumpole stories that were published throughout that decade.

It is tempting to cast a fond and uncritical eye on these last odes of Horace. But that would be Rumpollyanaish. These stories are not much more than literary comfort food, reuniting us for one last time with the familiar characters of 4 Equity Court, the foibles of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, and the doubtful savor of Pommeroy's Very Ordinary Red. They remind us warmly of Rumpole's sense of justice, his devotion to the adversary system, his sarcastic wit, and his quoting familiarity with Shakespeare and Wordsworth, to say nothing of that greatest of British criminal barristers, Edward Marshall Hall. But they are for the most part thin soup, plying familiar themes, stock characters and plots of limited interest.

Only two of the five tales are genuinely seasonal, though one of them, *Rumpole and the Boy*, is amusing for Mortimer's attempt to play O. Henry. And the crimes of those notorious South London villains, the Timsons, do have a holiday tone, with young David sent off to chokey for receiving a stolen

Christmas pudding. In a way, though, the holiday theme, such as it is, is a disadvantage, for when stories written over a period of years are collected we see that Mortimer reprised each time the same tired ironies of the curmudgeonly barrister exchanging with his unappreciative spouse the tie he never wears and the cologne she never uses.

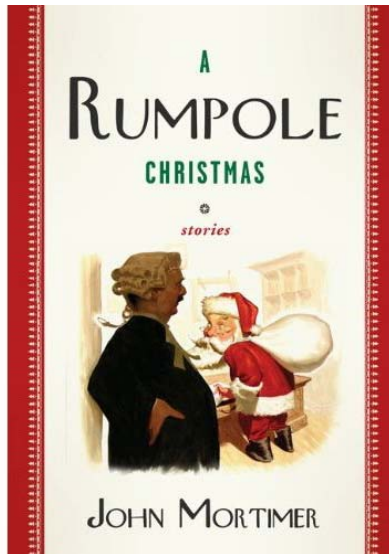
The collection nevertheless provides a varied docket, with an attempted burglary, two murders, extortion, safe-cracking, and Rumpole himself engaging in a little blackmail. Mortimer treats us to several courtroom scenes, at which he as an experienced trial lawyer excels. But the first four stories fall a notch below the consistently high levels of Mortimer's earlier published works.

The redeeming story is the last, *Rumpole and the Christmas Break*, which is as fine as the Best of Rumpole (the well-deserved title of a 1993 anthology). It features a plot of some complexity, a fine cross-examination, and a dollop of social commentary. Unfortunately for the experienced Rumpolean, however, Mortimer apparently liked this story so much himself that he recycled parts of its plot in a novel, *Rumpole and the Reign of Terror*, which appeared in book form two years later.

This volume is a melancholic reminder of not only Rumpole's literary creator, but also of his video personification,

the late Leo McKern, who for almost two decades prior to his death in 2002 inhabited the role much as Basil Rathbone and Sean Connery did those other iconic Englishmen, Holmes and Bond – though oddly, none of them was English, McKern hailing from Australia, Rathbone South Africa, and Connery Scotland.

Rumpole at Christmas is not an aperitif to whet the appetite for retaining Rumpole as one's literary barrister of choice. For that, pick up the *Best of Rumpole* or, better yet, one of the three Rumpole omnibi. For the more seasoned fan, try Mortimer's four delightful works of autobiography, *Clinging to the Wreckage*, *Murderers and Other Friends*, *The Summer of a Dormouse*, and *Where There's A Will*, and save this book for a mild after-dinner cordial – assuming that the last of the Chateau Thames Embankment has already been consumed.



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