

**THE MURDER  
OF THE  
MAHARAJAH**  
H.R.F. Keating

**WHEN HARRY  
MET RIPLEY....**



RIPLEY

HARRY

AN APPRECIATION OF HRF KEATING  
BY MIKE RIPLEY

H.R.F.  
KEATING

WINNER OF THE CWA DIAMOND DAGGER AWARD

'Mr Keating has created in Inspector Ghote  
an enchanting and engaging character'

P.D. James



A SMALL  
CASE FOR  
INSPECTOR  
GHOTE?

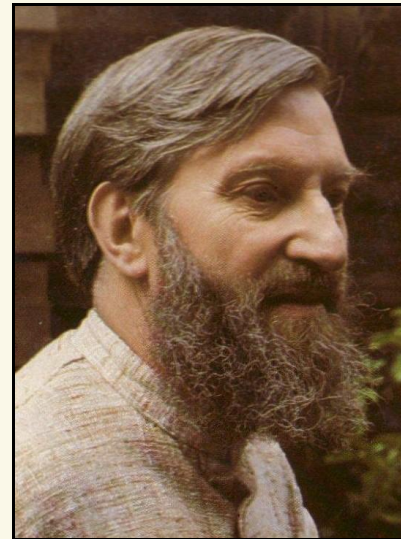
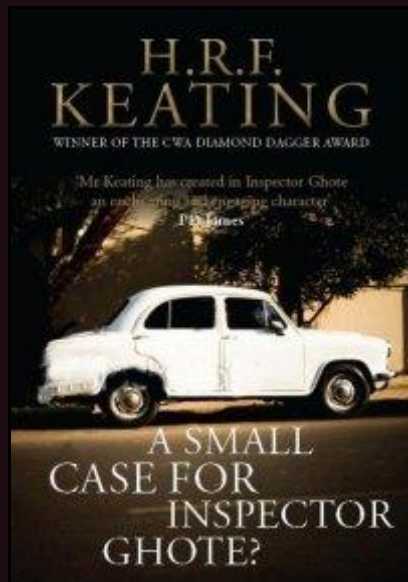
## *When Harry Met Ripley...*

Thankfully, I have never needed to use the full appellation “Henry Reymond Fitzwalter Keating”. On book jackets and in by-lines and indices “H.R.F. Keating” seems to suffice, saving valuable keystrokes, and in person the man himself is more than happy to be referred to as “Harry”.



Harry Keating and Mike Ripley not quite eyeball to eyeball in a panel discussion on plotting a crime novel at Girton College, Cambridge, 2007.

He has a name, which once seen in print is not easily forgotten and I saw the name long before I ever saw, let alone met, the man. I saw his name everywhere in bookshops and indeed on the covers of books, yet not *his* books, for as I was discovering the thrill and diversity of crime fiction, I found myself following a trail of clues indicating ‘something interesting in here’ in the form of one- or two-line recommendations on dust jackets signed by the (then) mysterious “H.R.F. Keating” in his capacity as crime fiction reviewer for *The Times*.

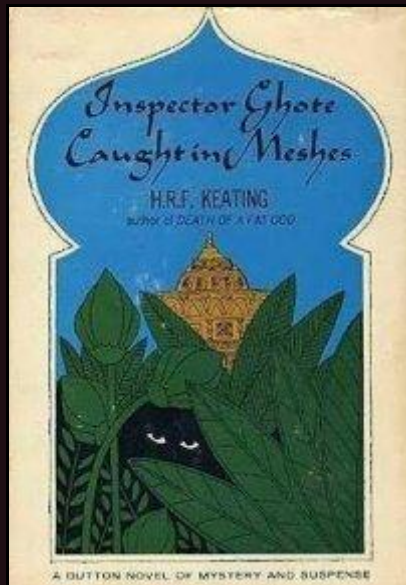


HRFK in 1982.

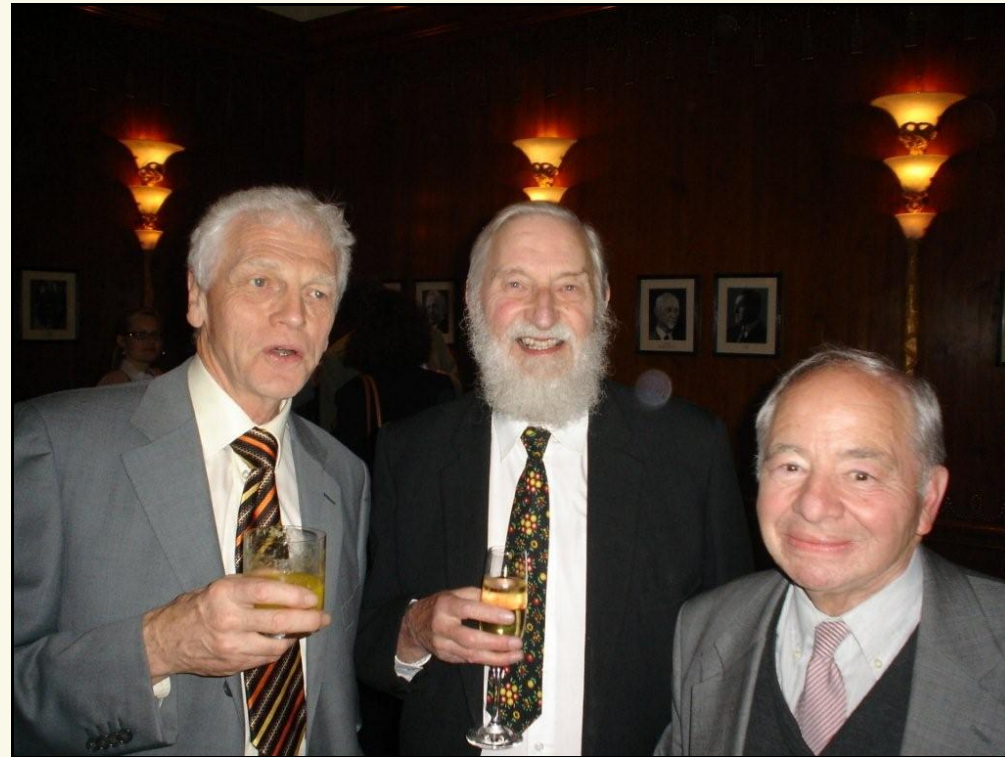
I never actually read *The Times* (the *Yorkshire Post* was the journal of record in my youth and we regarded *The Times* as dangerously left-wing and, worst of all, *southern*) but I followed those Keating recommendations – which would be called ‘blurbs’ today – and found I was rarely disappointed. For example, he described Lionel Davidson’s *The Chelsea Murders* as “An entertainment...A puzzle. A black comedy. A pleasure through and through.” He was right on all counts and though I had already discovered Davidson, I found myself agreeing with the mysterious Mr Keating and so allowed him to direct me towards authors I didn’t know, using him like a fraudulent psychic would call upon a spirit guide.

No dodgy table-thumping or displays of ectoplasm here though, for his suggestions were always solid and without them I would never have discovered Frank Parrish’s *Fire In The Barley* (“well-conceived, excitingly paced story”); the wonderful stylist P.M. Hubbard’s *A Thirsty Evil* (“Acquire the Hubbard taste, it’s richly rewarding”) and the amazing Anthony Price’s *The Labyrinth Makers* (“One of those books you simultaneously want to finish and long to go on for hours yet”). There were certainly many others and then my reading expanded geometrically when in 1982 I was given that indispensable guide to the genre





*Whodunit?* The editor was, of course, H.R.F. Keating.



A trio of Diamond Dagger winners: Peter Lovesey, Harry Keating and Colin Dexter. [Picture: Ali Karim]

But by that time I had detected that ‘HRFK’ had written a few books himself and indeed was quite famous for writing a series of crime novels with an Indian detective even though he himself had travelled no further east than Dover – or so the legend went – and thus my first meeting with Inspector Ganesh Ghote, who had actually burst on to the crime scene in *The Perfect Murder* in 1964.

Meeting with Ghote’s creator recently, in, ironically, the year of *Slumdog Millionaire*, though in his comfortable, book-lined home in Notting Hill rather than in Mumbai, Harry is

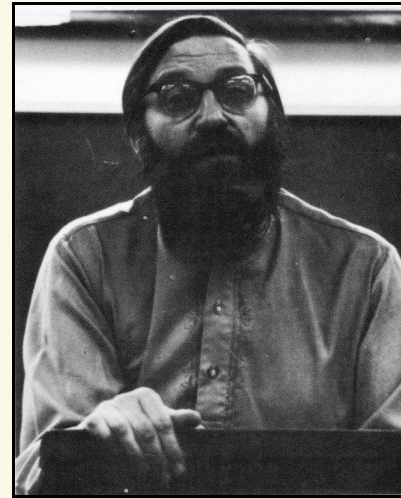
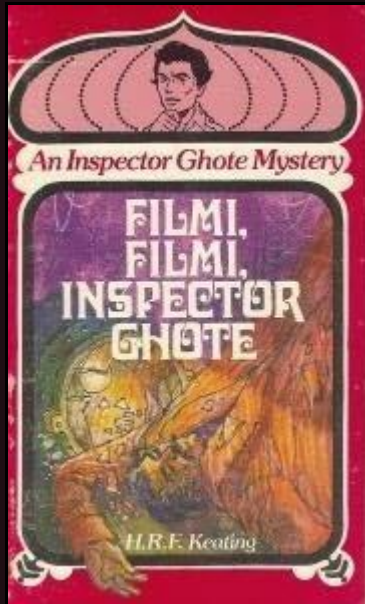
disarmingly open (as he always is) about the creative process behind that auspicious debut.



Harry making a point to another past Chairman of the Crime Writers Association, Catherine Aird.

He had, in fact, had five novels published BG (Before Ghote), which, according to the reviewers of the day, were all said to be witty, lively and thought-provoking, if highly contrived. Some of the titles also betrayed a mischievous taste for the surreal, such as *Zen There Was Murder* and *The Dog It Was That Died*, with one of the most striking Penguin covers ever.

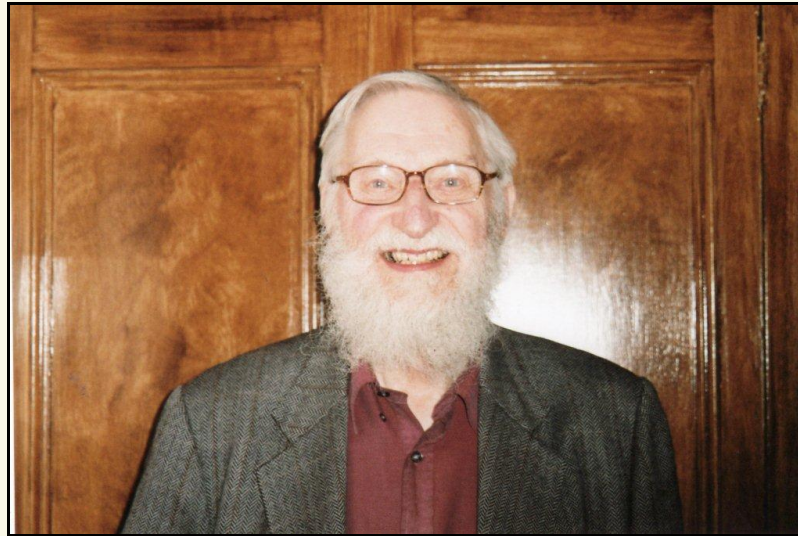
They were not, however, finding a publisher in America and Harry and his agent agreed this was a two-pipe (if not quite three) problem which needed to be solved. Perhaps the answer lay in a new, more exotic, setting and so, practical as ever, Harry “sat down with an Atlas and flicked idly through it until I got to Page India”. The rest, as they say, was history – or at least 26 novels and goodness knows how many short stories in the Ghote canon, so far.



A younger, more serious, Harry at the podium delivering a lecture.

That initial outing for the unassuming little Bombay CID man won Harry the first of his CWA Gold Daggers and also many loyal fans, not surprisingly as this was less than 20 years since the formal end of The Raj and large numbers of British readers had served in India, remembering it with affection. What was surprising, or so Harry modestly insists was how “astonishingly well” the book was received in the USA, where it was reviewed by Anthony Boucher no less, who named it his ‘book of the year’ despite the year being only three or four months old.

Considering that his actual experience of India was nil Harry must have done his research well, for, as he says with a smile, “there were not many complaints” which was quite an achievement given the large number of ‘old India hands’ still around in 1964. Harry did, however, get a letter of complaint from a self-styled ‘Guru’ (it was the Sixties after all), although on closer inspection this turned out to be an appeal for contributions to the Guru’s own personal school of philosophy.



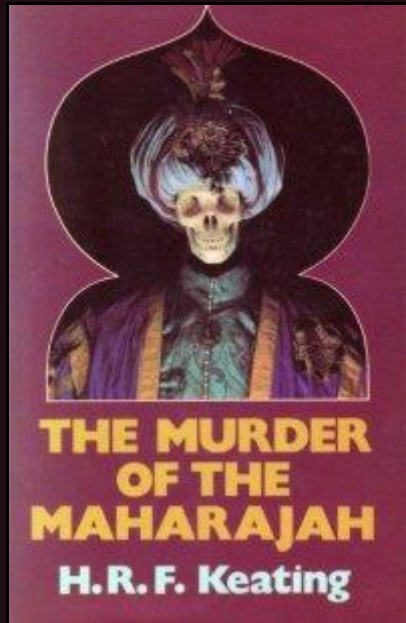
Harry in March 2009.

Ghote, thought Harry, was a good enough character to pursue for a further two or three books and *Inspector Ghote's Good Crusade* and *Inspector Ghote Caught in Meshes* promptly followed and were received so well that "it was an obvious choice to stay with him". So he did, with a new title almost annually.

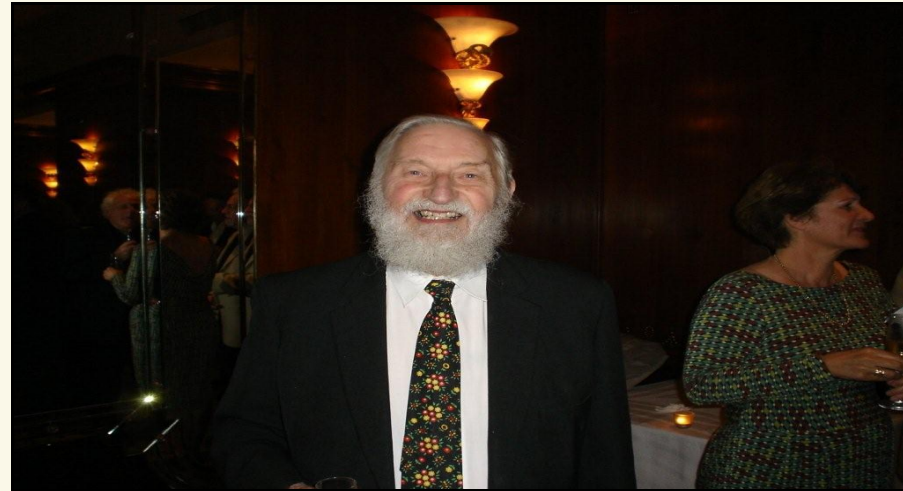
It may seem that Harry was defying the old maxim that you should write about what you know and he cheerfully admits that "it was all going quite nicely without having to face the actuality" but then one morning the actuality came calling. It was at the breakfast table with the morning post (those were the days!) that Harry opened a letter from Air India, which basically said: *You've been writing about India, now come and see it* and offered him a ticket, thankfully as return one, on one of their flights to Bombay, as it was then. It was an offer Harry, in all conscience, could not afford to refuse.

The Ghote books were known and read in India but still, the prospect of confronting the "actuality" of a world he had created in the safety of Notting Hill several thousand miles away, must have been daunting if not nerve-wracking. Harry spent the entire Air India flight





there calming his nerves and rehearsing an appropriate speech for that dramatic moment when he landed and stepped for the first time on to Indian soil. It went, as he recalls, “Something along the lines of ‘One small step for Inspector Ghote...’” but in reality the speech was never delivered. As the Air India jet landed and Harry stepped on to the tarmac of Bombay airport, his first historic words were: “My God, it’s hot!”



Harry in 2005. In the background, no doubt casing the joint, is crime writer Denise Danks. [Picture: Ali Karim]

To say Harry was warmly received in India would be to stoop to a pun too far and certainly not one he would make without squirming with embarrassment, but it marked the start of a fruitful partnership and eventually brought Harry a walk-on cameo role in the 1988 film version of *The Perfect Murder*, produced by Ismail Merchant. Harry goes to Bollywood? Not a bad progression for someone who had discovered India in an Atlas in Notting Hill.

And India served him well, earning him a second Gold Dagger for *The Murder of the Maharajah* in 1980. Set in the Indian state of Bhopore in 1930, this was Harry’s transposition of the classic country-house murder involving a fiendishly clever method of murder – though he did get letters this time from old India hands claiming it was implausible!



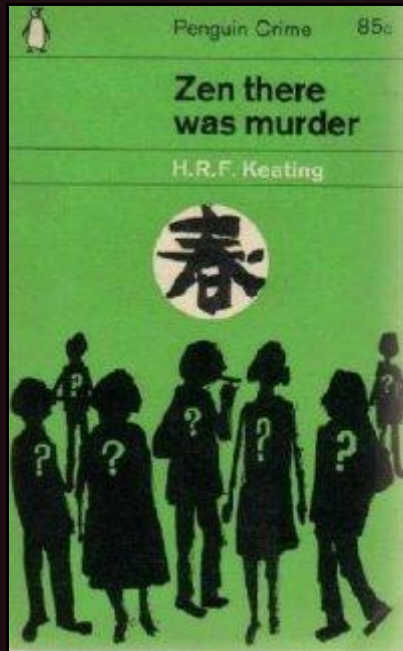
With its height of the Raj setting, this is often dismissed from the Ghote Canon as a ‘stand alone’ novel as, in 1930, Ganesh Ghote would hardly have been born. But I am not so sure. The unsuspecting reader should read the last two paragraphs very carefully...

There was a too-short-lived BBC adaption of the Ghote stories and the books themselves continued (although Harry wrote many non-Ghote books) up to *Breaking and Entering*, published in 2000, when it was announced to a startled world that the series would end. It was a decision reached on the advice of his agent; though Ghote would not retire, be promoted (being kicked upstairs is a well-worn exit strategy), be killed or die of drink, he would just *cease*. Harry, of course, would not retire, rather he would concentrate on a new series featuring policewoman Harriet Martens (a more fashionable detective?) who appeared in *The Hard Detective* in the year Ghote seemed to disappear. To make the break a clean one and mark the end of an era, Harry consigned all his Ghote (and India) files to a Royal Borough of Kensington recycling bin, much to the annoyance of his long-suffering wife Sheila (Mitchell, the actress).



Zia Mohyeddin as Inspector Ghote in a 1969 BBC dramatisation.

But Ganesh Ghote was far too good a character to go quietly into the night or be filed as ‘Not Needed On Voyage’ in the luggage compartment of a novelist’s imagination. After



seven Harriet Martens books, which had their fans and which were expertly read on audio books by Sheila Mitchell, the call of the Ghote became too much to resist and in 2008, he returned triumphantly, and cunningly, in a *prequel* to his 1964 debut, in ***Inspector Ghote's First Case***.

At exactly what point Harry began to “roundly curse” himself for recycling all his Ghote files is not known, “but fortunately I still had the little notebooks I always keep when writing”. He also had a prime source of research at his fingertips: the two dozen Inspector Ghote books already published! There can be few writers who can have had the luxury of such a rich supply of source material. And so close to hand!

As a prequel set in 1964, the book also qualified and was indeed shortlisted for the 2008 Ellis Peters Award for historical mysteries. The other short-listed authors must have hated Harry. Whereas they had had to spend months if not years researching London during the Blitz, 12<sup>th</sup> century England, post-war Argentina or the Edwardian railway system, all Harry had to do was read his own back catalogue!

Which of course he did – the whole lot – and he must have quite liked them, for next month sees the publication of another ‘historical’ Ghote, ***A Small Case for Inspector Ghote?*** again set in the early 1960s.



Harry bashing away on a faithful typewriter in the late 1970s.

To Harry it makes perfect sense to concentrate on Ghote's early career as to revive the character in 2009 Mumbai would mean a very old character and one not of a time with the *Slumdog Millionaire* city of Mumbai. Whatever, Harry certainly seems to be enjoying Ghote's return and there is a typical Keating subtlety in the addition of a question mark to the title of the new book. That, Harry confides, makes all the difference, for Inspector Ghote's (latest) 'small' case turns out to be anything but a small case in fact it threatens to be a career-ending (almost before it has begun) case.

But why does Ghote work as a character? He is surely the most unassuming, most un-heroic hero in modern crime fiction. One might almost say (as I did) that Ghote's most heroic quality is that he is totally un-heroic and is therefore continuously and professionally underestimated by his foes. Why *should* Ghote work as a character?

"I could answer..." says Harry, then pauses to add the caveat, "...but it would be a *bad* answer.... because he's me. Both he and I worry about what people think of us."





Ghote is no genius like Sherlock Holmes – on whom Harry is a recognised authority – and no white knight of the mean streets like Philip Marlowe. He does, it is true, use Holmesian deductive methods but adds to them a crucial understanding of the complex local culture. In this it is almost a case of the detective as cultural anthropologist and he shares common ground with the detectives created by Tony Hillerman and James McClure, yet Ghote's gently probing curiosity into how human beings deal with life puts him, I would suggest, in the same filing cabinet of fictional detectives which contains Simenon's Inspector Maigret.

Harry is not displeased with the suggestion and agrees that, like Maigret, Ghote isn't so much a real policeman as a composite, mythical one and he is quite right when he points up the similarities between himself and his fictional hero. Both are extremely polite, diplomatic and gentle; so it wasn't a "bad" answer, for in a very good way, Harry *is* Ghote.

It is something I had suspected long before our meeting in Notting Hill in Harry's study where, framed on the wall, is the first (and only) typewritten page of *Jim's Adventure*, Harry's first foray into fiction – crime fiction of course – at the age of 8!

It may be the first time I have ever seen this particular historic document, but it is not the first time I have met Harry; far from it. I think we first met round about 1990 at, if memory serves, a party in a fashionable London hotel to mark the launch of a new Peter Lovesey novel. It was a notable event for me, for not only did I get to meet Harry, but also Julian Symons and thus, in the space one cocktail (or perhaps two) I had touched base with the two main critical analysts of the British (nay, global) crime fiction scene of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Since then, Harry has foolishly agreed to appear on various panels and platforms with me

in tow, at conventions and conferences. He was even my editor for the annual anthology of the Crime Writers' Association, *Crime Waves 1* in 1991, though if there was a *Crime Waves 2* I was not invited to contribute and we were asked to work together by *The Times* in 2000 to produce a definitive list of the 100 Best Mysteries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which we did with a surprising amount of instant agreement, some intelligent debate, a small amount of horse-trading and absolutely no resorting to fisticuffs.

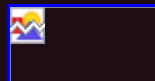
I can say in all honesty that there is no better person to appear with in a public debate if the subject is crime fiction, for apart from his years as crime critic for *The Times* (1967-1983), his books on Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie, his chairmanship of the CWA (1970-71) and his presidency of the Detection Club (1985-2000), he is *a fan* as well as an acute observer of the genre and is widely and well read.

In 1978 in *Crime Writers*, a book he edited to accompany a BBC series, he was required to do what all reviewers hate doing: "crystal ball gazing" to predict the stars of the future. He very astutely highlighted a young crime writer called Jacqueline Wilson, who was to turn, soon after, away from the dark side and make her name and fortune in children's literature, but at the time it was, as they say, 'a good spot'.

So too was Harry's prediction that the more sensational and gruesome murder stories 'where the motive for murder was publicity' of a new and unknown American writer (in 1978 remember) were likely to be simply *the first of a considerable stream*. The book which prompted that comment was something called *Season of the Machete* by someone called James Patterson and I think that a pretty fair piece of fortune telling.

It almost tempts me into making a prediction myself, that *A Small Case for Inspector Ghote?* will not be the last we hear from the small but perfectly formed Sherriff of Bombay.

*Mike Ripley*



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