



The Invisible Code: A Peculiar Crimes Unit Mystery

By Christopher Fowler

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London's craftiest and boldest detectives, Arthur Bryant and John May, are back in this deviously twisting mystery of black magic, madness, and secrets hidden in plain sight.

When a young woman is found dead in the pews of St. Bride's Church—alone and showing no apparent signs of trauma—Arthur Bryant assumes this case will go to the Peculiar Crimes Unit, an eccentric team tasked with solving London's most puzzling murders. Yet the city police take over the investigation, and the PCU is given an even more baffling and bewitching assignment.

Called into headquarters by Oskar Kasavian, the head of Home Office security, Bryant and May are shocked to hear that their longtime adversary now desperately needs their help. Oskar's wife, Sabira, has been acting strangely for weeks—succumbing to violent mood swings, claiming an evil presence is bringing her harm—and Oskar wants the PCU to find out why. And if there's any duo that can deduce the method behind her madness, it's the indomitable Bryant and May.

When a second bizarre death reveals a surprising link between the two women's cases, Bryant and May set off on a trail of clues from the notorious Bedlam hospital to historic Bletchley Park. And as they are drawn into a world of encrypted codes and symbols, concealed rooms and high-society clubs, they must work quickly to catch a killer who lurks even closer than they think.

Witty, suspenseful, and ingeniously plotted, *The Invisible Code* is Christopher Fowler at the very top of his form.

Praise for *The Invisible Code*

“Delightful . . . priceless dialogue . . . Fowler's small but ardent American following deserves to get much larger. . . . *The Invisible Code* has immense charm. . . . Fowler creates a fine blend of vivid descriptions, . . . quick thinking and artful understatement. . . . Best of all are the two main characters, particularly Bryant, whose fine British stodginess is matched perfectly by the agility of his

crime-solving mind.”—**Janet Maslin**, *The New York Times*

“Excellent . . . In the light of the challenges that Fowler has given his heroes in prior books, it’s particularly impressive that he manages to surpass himself once again.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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“A series of narratives that exert an Ancient Mariner–like grip on the reader . . . Christopher Fowler is something of a British national treasure.”—*Crime Time*

“Quirky, ingenious and quite brilliant . . . If you haven’t indulged you are really missing out. . . . Wonderful, gently humorous stuff, so clever.”—*The Bookseller*

“A brilliant series of impossible crime novels.”—*The Denver Post*

“*Grumpy Old Men* does *CSI* with a twist of Dickens! Bryant and May are hilarious. I love this series.”—**Karen Marie Moning**

“An example of what Christopher Fowler does so well, which is to merge the old values with the new values—reassuring, solid, English, and traditional. He’s giving us two for the price of one here.”—**Lee Child**

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Invisible Code*

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About the Author

Christopher Fowler is the acclaimed author of the award-winning *Full Dark House* and nine other Peculiar Crimes Unit mysteries: *The Water Room*, *Seventy-Seven Clocks*, *Ten Second Staircase*, *White Corridor*, *The Victoria Vanishes*, *Bryant & May on the Loose*, *Bryant & May off the Rails*, *The Memory of Blood*, and *The Invisible Code*. He lives in London, where he is at work on his next Peculiar Crimes Unit novel.

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Fowler / THE INVISIBLE CODE

Part One

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The Case

One

Close to God

There was a witch around here somewhere.

The Fleet Street office workers who sat in the cool shadow of the church on their lunch breaks had no idea that she was hiding among them. They squatted in the little garden squares while they ate their sandwiches, queued at coffee shops and paced the pavements staring at the screens of their smartphones, not realising that she was preparing to call down lightning and spit brimstone.

On the surface the witch was one of them, but that was just a disguise. She had the power to change her outward appearance, to look like anyone she was standing near.

Lucy said, 'She won't be somebody posh. Witches are always poor.'

Tom said, 'I can't tell who's posh. Everyone looks the same.'

He was right; to a child they did. Grey suits, black suits, white shirts, black skirts, blue ties, print blouses, black shoes. London's workforce on the move.

Lucy pulled at her favourite yellow T-shirt and felt her tummy rumble. 'She'll have to appear soon. They often travel in threes. When a witch starts to get hungry, she loses concentration and lets go of her disguise. The spell will weaken and she'll turn back into her real self.'

She was crouching in the bushes, and wanted to stand up because it was making her legs hurt, but knew she might get caught if she did. The flowerbeds bristled with tropical plants that had spiny razor-sharp leaves and looked as if they should be somewhere else. A private security guard patrolled the square, shifting the people who looked as if they belonged somewhere else, too.

'What does she really look like?' asked Tom. 'I mean, when she drops her disguise?'

Lucy answered without hesitation. 'She has a green face and a hooked nose covered in hairy warts, and long brown teeth and yellow eyes. And her breath smells of rotting sardines.' She thought for a moment. 'And toilets.'

Tom snorted in disgust as he looked around the courtyard for likely suspects. Nearby, an overweight woman in her mid-thirties was standing in a doorway eating a Pret A Manger crayfish and rocket sandwich. She seemed a likely candidate. The first of the summer's wasps were hovering around, scenting the remains of office lunches. The woman anxiously batted one away as she ate.

'It can't be her,' said Lucy.

'Why not?' asked Tom.

'Witches don't feel pain, so she wouldn't be scared of a stupid wasp.'

'Can a witch be a man?'

'No, that would be a warlock. It has to be a woman.'

Tom was getting tired of the game. Lucy seemed to be making up extra rules as she went along. The June sun shone through a gap in the buildings and burned the back of his neck. The sky above Salisbury Court was as blue as the sea looked in old films.

He was starting to think that this was a stupid way to spend a Saturday morning when he could have been at soccer. He had been looking forward to seeing the Dr Who exhibition as well, but right at the last minute his dad had to work instead, and said, 'You can come with me to the office,' as if it was a reasonable substitute. There was nothing to do in the office. You weren't allowed to touch the computers or open any of the drawers. His dad seemed to like being there. He always cheered up when he had to go into the office on a Saturday.

The only other father who had brought his child in that morning was Lucy's, so he was stuck playing with a girl until both of their fathers had finished their work. At least Lucy knew about the game, which was unusual because most girls didn't play games like that. She explained that she had two older brothers and always ended up joining in with them. She didn't tell him they had outgrown the game now and spent their days wired into hip-hop and dodgy downloads.

'How about that one?' said Lucy, taking the initiative. Her brothers could never make up their minds about anything, and always ended up arguing, so she was used to making all the decisions.

'Nah, she's too pretty,' said Tom, watching a slender girl in a very short grey skirt stride past to the building at the end of the courtyard.

'That's the point. The prettier they look on the outside, the uglier they are inside. Too late, she's gone.'

'I'm bored now.'

'Five more minutes. She's here somewhere.' There were only a few workers left in the square, plus a motorcycle courier who must have been stifling in his helmet and leathers.

'It's this one. I have a feeling. I bet she belongs to a coven, that's a club for witches. Remember, we have to get them before they get us. Let's check her out. Come on.'

Lucy led the way past a sad-looking young woman who had just seated herself on the bench nearest the church. She had opened a paperback and was reading it intently. Lucy turned to Tom with an air of theatrical nonchalance and pointed behind the flat of her palm.

'That's definitely her.'

'How can we tell if she's a witch?' Tom whispered.

‘Look for signs. Try to see what she’s reading.’

‘I can’t walk past her again, she’ll see.’

‘Wait, I’ve got an idea.’ Tom had stolen a tennis ball from his father’s office. Now he produced it from his pocket. ‘Catch, then throw it back to me in her direction. I’ll miss and I’ll have to go and get it.’

Lucy was a terrible actress. If the sad-faced young woman had looked up, she would have stopped and stared at the little girl gurning and grimacing before her.

‘I’m throwing now,’ Lucy said loudly, hurling the ball ten feet wide of the boy. Tom scrambled in slow motion around the bench, and the young woman briefly raised her eyes.

Tom ran back to Lucy’s side. ‘She’s reading a book about babies.’

‘What was it called?’

‘Rosemary’s Baby. By a woman called Ira something.’

‘Then she’s definitely a witch.’

‘How do you know?’

Lucy blew a raspberry of impatience. ‘Don’t you know anything? Witches eat babies! Everyone knows that.’

‘So she really is one,’ Tom marvelled. ‘She looks so normal.’

‘Yeah, clever, isn’t it?’ Lucy agreed. ‘So, how are we going to kill her?’

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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