

Ngaio Marsh: Her Life in Crime, 2008, Joanne Drayton, 1869506359,
9781869506353, HarperCollins, 2008

One of the celebrated 1930s and 40s 'Queens of Crime' Ngaio Marsh was probably our first million copy author. Her tightly written, stylish whodunits were perennial favorites, rating alongside Agatha Christie and Dorothy L Sayers. She was also seriously in love with the theatre, and her triumphant return to New Zealand to establish the Court Theatre in Christchurch saw her feted and honored with the title dame of the British Empire. With her coterie of 'luvvies' the handsome gay boys who were a part of her entourage and her protégés in many fields of the arts, and her impeccable landed gentry upbringing, Dame Ngaio dominated the New Zealand performing arts scene for many years before her death. A biography was produced to no great acclaim, and it was a tedious hagiography of Dame Ngaio the woman of stature. Dr Jo Drayton, award winning art historian and writer was awarded the Alexander Turnbull fellowship for 2007 and has used the time to complete the research and writing of this her most exciting book to date. There was another story to be told, a much more textured, rich and fascinating story, of a young woman of ambiguous sexuality who reveled in the abandon of the Bohemian Riviera, whose spurned suitor committed suicide and whose scintillating murder mysteries all took their inspiration, setting or characters from the heady life she enjoyed as a member of the in set in England, where one moved between town house and country estate. In what will be one of the most read and most significant biographies of 2008, Ngaio Marsh comes to life and finally steps out from behind the cardboard cutout of respectability and decorum.

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