

“I am Half-Sick of Shadows” by Alan Bradley.
Delacourte Press, 2011. \$23.00, 320 pages.

Eleven year old Flavia de Luce is looking forward to Christmas with both excitement and a bit of apprehension. Not only is her beloved home Buckshaw about to be taken over by a film crew for the duration of the holidays putting a hold on de Luce Christmas traditions, but she has also devised (in her opinion) a fiendishly clever plan to finally prove the existence of Father Christmas by trapping him in the chimney with a chemical concoction fashioned in her own private laboratory.

When the film crew arrives, it brings with it one of England’s most legendary stars of the silver screen, Phyllis Wyvern, and a host of other unconventional characters including a beleaguered assistant, a diminutive director, and most unexpectedly, an old friend of Flavia’s from one of her recent investigations.

In response to a request by the vicar, the renowned actress and her costar agree to perform the balcony scene of “Romeo and Juliet” as part of a benefit for the church’s dilapidated roof. With the church out of commission for various reasons, the performance is moved to Buckshaw, and after a terrific snow storm leaves the roads impassable, half the village of Bishop’s Lacy ends up trapped at the de Luce family estate two days before Christmas.

With Flavia’s tendency to discover corpses, it should come as no surprise when a fresh one turns up in the middle of the night strangled with a strip of film, and there’s certainly no shortage of suspects for Flavia to investigate with the entire film crew and half the village on hand. Using her inside knowledge of Buckshaw and all her ingenuity, Flavia is determined to assist her friend Inspector Hewitt in his inquiry, even if he thinks he doesn’t need her help.

And of course, she must do all of this while planning her capture of Father Christmas, navigating the tricky relationship with her older sisters, Ophelia and Daphne, and keeping an eye on (and a hand in) all the other goings on in the crowded house.

As a take on the traditional English country house murder, “I am Half-Sick of Shadows” is another delightful entry in the Flavia de Luce series. A mix between Kay Thompson’s Eloise and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the precocious young detective is just as entertaining and resourceful here as she has been in previous entries. It’s not at all necessary to have read the previous titles, “The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie,” “The Weed the Strings the Hangman’s Bag,” and “A Red Herring without Mustard” to enjoy this holiday tale of mystery and murder, but each one of Flavia’s previous adventures are sure to charm and entertain.

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