

Digging up Clues with Amelia Peabody (Emerson)

by "L.G."

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About thirteen years ago, I came across a review of a romantic/gothic/mystery novel titled *Crocodile on the Sandbank*, by someone named Elizabeth Peters; the author was stated to be an Egyptologist. A student at the time, I was a stranger to public libraries and almost a stranger to fiction of any kind, so I mentally filed *Crocodile* away under "books I should get around to reading someday." Months later, however, I saw a paperback of the novel in an airport bookshop and, remembering the very positive review, bought a copy to while away my time.

And so a fan was born! No mystery or gothic buff, I was nevertheless enchanted by the high quality of the author's writing style and her technique of creating a Victorian pastiche; and, especially, I was intrigued by the heroine herself. "Spunky," "feisty" and all the other adjectives beloved of romance writers did no justice to Peters' Amelia Peabody, a woman of erudition, intelligence, strong opinions, and an even stronger character.

Crocodile opens in Rome, 1885, with Amelia, newly left a wealthy "old maid" (of thirty-two) by her father's death, looking for a suitable female to accompany her on a journey to Egypt. Happening upon a dispossessed and somewhat distressed English heiress, she takes the young lady as her traveling companion. Thus begins Amelia's involvement in a mysterious plot featuring strange men impersonating ancient Egyptian characters. Thus far, the story sticks with some of the most common conventions of the Gothic: abandoned heiress, dangerous and threatening figures, exotic locations. All are in the tradition of Victoria Holt's *Curse of the Kings*. However, in *Crocodile* things take a particularly Petersian twist, combining gothic, mystery and comedic elements.

As did her namesake (Amelia Edwards), Amelia Peabody and her new companion sail up the Nile in a comfortable (not to say luxurious) *dahabiyeh*, stopping to examine the various ancient monuments along the way. Amelia is especially struck with pyramids, or more particularly, with their interiors. As with Lady Hilda Petrie (wife of Sir Flinders), nothing can stop Amelia from her investigations. Hilda Petrie on one occasion took off her skirt before being lowered into the interior of a pyramid; further items of clothing were removed as she and her husband explored the inner chambers. Amelia herself remains fully clothed but otherwise emulates Lady Petrie as

she investigates the dilapidated and bat-guano encrusted interiors of several pyramids before being persuaded to move on. Visits to the interiors of various monuments are a feature of several sets of archaeological memoirs: Miss Peabody's obsession with pyramids recalls Amelia Edwards' fascination with Abu Simel. [\(1\)](#) (Thankfully, however, the fictional heroine had no thought of staining the pyramids with coffee to cover up unsightly blotches)

After these side trips, Amelia and her young lady companion pay a more prolonged visit to the excavations at Tell el Amarna, the site of digging by two English archaeologists, the Emerson brothers, Radcliffe (the elder) and Walter. From this point on, the plot (as they say) thickens, with missing wills, spurned suitors, a mysterious animated mummy and developing love stories, set against the backdrop of the ruined city of Hagg Quandil, the cliff tombs of the Amarna nobles and the Royal Tomb itself.

The Amarna excavations carried out by the Emerson brothers as described in this book are based on those of William Flinders Petrie, although the latter did not actually take place until the 1890s. However, Peters has appropriated some of the events of the Petrie diggings, including the covering of a painted-plaster pavement in the central palace with a mixture of tapioca and water (applied with the tip of a finger) and the pavement's subsequent destruction by local villagers. The tombs at the site are used as a "dig house" (just as Petrie was fond of doing); it is made clear in one chapter that the Emerson's brothers' sleeping chamber is in – well, I won't spoil the fun for you "detecting" familiar sites is one of the joys of *Crocodile* for Egyptologists.

This novel, like its sequels, draws much of its atmosphere from the language used. Taking as inspiration for style Victorian travelers' diaries, the author has also been meticulous in her usage of the then-current spellings of Arab and ancient Egyptian names, such as "Dashoor." The most obvious of this to modern readers is "Khuenaten" for "Akhenaten," or "Usertsen" for "Sensuret." In addition, an air of realism is added by the use of historical personages as characters, such as Sir Evelyn Baring, (Lord Cromer, Consul of Egypt from 1885-1907), Gaston Maspero and Emil Brugsch, who all appear in minor roles.

After such an introduction, I (and fellow converts to Peters and Peabody) was in a flutter to read *The Curse of the Pharaohs* when it finally appeared in 1982. In this sequel, set five years after *Crocodile on the Sandbank*, Amelia and Radcliffe Emerson are married and have a baby boy, and are living the domestic life back in Kent. Despite their happy marriage, they are not professionally content, however, as both are pining for Egypt and more archaeological adventures. Fortuitously, Lady Baskerville arrives on the scene at this moment. The beautiful and much-younger widow of a famous archaeological patron, she has come to seek Emerson's help in continuing her husband's reputedly "cursed" excavation in the Valley of the Kings. The late Lord Baskerville seems to be an amalgam of Lord Carnarvon (Howard Carter's patron) and the American Theodore M. Davis. Baskerville physically resembles Carnarvon and is described as having the latter's ill-health; but the tomb he has been excavating in *Curse* is one of the sites Davis found and published.

Other colorful characters introduced in the second volume include Kevin O'Connell (a tabloid reporter), Madame Berengaria (the reincarnation of Tawoseret, Tiye, et al.) and Bastet the cat. Although I am not certain if the outlandish Madame Berengaria is meant to be based on a real

town-character of Nineteenth Century Luxor, she definitely reminds me of Agatha Christie's Salome Ottersbourne, as played by Angela Lansbury in the film "Death on the Nile." Red-haired O'Connell is a practitioner of what is sometimes known as "yellow journalism"; his modern counterparts write for papers which still trumped "Pharaoh's Curse Kills Museum Guide," "Pyramids Reveal Outcome of World War III," and other gems.

Several actual historical characters also make appearances in *Curse*. Rev. Archibald Sayce has a brief scene at the opening of the novel, along with Charles Edwin Wilbour. Eugene Grebaut, as Director of Antiquities Service, provides the focus of one rather comic episode early in the tale; in case readers should feel that Mr. Grebaut is dealt with unfairly by Peters, I would remind them of his entry in *Who Was Who in Egyptology*:

"This appointment [as head of the Antiquities Service] was unfortunate as he was by nature unsuited to this work and caused much ill feeling both with Egyptologists and natives."

The process of excavation in this sequel is given somewhat more attention than it was in *Crocodile*. Although by no means an archaeological diary, the steps in uncovering a rock-cut tomb are described in some detail. Moreover, the Emersons show themselves to be in advance of any of their archaeological contemporaries, through use of sieving for small finds and meticulous record-keeping of bones, shards and even single beads. The excavation is, in fact, a subplot, parallel to and pertinent to the whodunit mystery unfolding. As in Peters's previous Peabody novel, disparate elements of murder, comedy and the traditions of the Victorian gothic come together; in *Curse*, however, comedy and mystery set the tone of the book.

Amelia aficionados didn't have to wait long for the third novel in what was obviously becoming an extended series: *The Mummy Case* appeared in 1985. There were immediately apparent differences between the new volume and its two predecessors. Firstly, a new major character has been introduced, the remarkable young "Ramses" (Walter Peabody) Emerson. (Actually, he'd made a brief appearance as a willful toddler in *Curse*.) Now a boy of five or six, as described, Ramses might be based (physically) on a photograph of the young Petrie; but his precociousness is truly prodigious (not to say unbelievable).

In addition, where previous novels had been set in well-known sites, *The Mummy Case* was situated in the most obscure Egyptian location that the author could conceive of: Mazghunah. Anyone familiar with Egypt could have pictured the settings of the other two books, but this one was something of a puzzler. Doing a little background work revealed...not too much, really. Mazghunah is a pyramid site located fairly close to Dashur, the place where Jacques De Morgan excavated the jewelry of several Middle Kingdom princesses now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art; however, the casing stones have long ago been removed from Mazghunah's two pyramids and their superstructures are barely discernible. It was a site excavated by Petrie along with other archaeologists in 1910; despite the fact that it is the location of the ruined pyramids of two Middle Kingdom pharaohs, it gets scant mention in Petrie's various volumes of memoirs.

The very barrenness of Mazghunah creates quite a different atmosphere in this novel, making it a more somber book than its predecessors; the emphasis here is on detection. It is only in the later

chapters that archaeology per se once again becomes a focal point; but, as always in the Peabody stories, Egypt and its antiquities are at the heart of the mystery.

Once again historical personages mix with fictional characters: Rev. Sayce makes a brief re-appearance, accompanied by a Mr. Wilberforce (as a sobriquet for Wilbour). Also featured, as it were, is M. De Morgan, excavator of the treasure of the Middle Kingdom princesses at Dashur.

The Lion in the Valley returns Amelia, Radcliffe and Ramses to the pyramid fields south of Giza and Cairo. In this fourth volume, Emerson has managed to obtain a much better concession at Dashur, due to certain machinations of young Ramses. A Moriarty-like "Master Criminal" intends to interfere with the Emersons' digging, however. This character first made his appearance in *The Mummy Case*, where he revealed himself (or rather did not reveal himself) as a "master of disguise." The net result is that Amelia suspects almost everyone of being this "genius of crime," and drives Emerson to distraction with her obsession. As if this were not confusing enough, there are also several other cases of mistaken identity, impersonations and misapprehensions; at various points in the book, almost every important character assumes some kind of disguise. Just about the only uncomplicated element in *Lion* is the excavation, which gets rather short shrift in favor of the mystery.

The real Egyptologists who make an appearance this time are a young Howard E. Carter and James E. Quibell. The latter appears in an incident based on history. He arrives at the Emerson's camp looking for medicine for the members of Petrie's staff who are excavating at Sakkara. This ailing staff includes a young lady in whom Mr. Quibell is personally interested; the incident is based on a famous story concerning the "courtship" of Quibell and Annie Petrie, who later became his wife. (Petrie is described as following in Emerson's lead in having women archaeologists on his dig; she neglects to mention, however, that most of these women, with the exception of herself, were working as artists.)

In the fifth and most recent volume of the series, *The Deeds of the Disturber* (1988), the action shifts from Egypt to London. This volume takes a different direction from the others, not only in location, but in increased usage of real characters. E.A. Wallis Budge appears as Emerson's professional rival, although of a different sort than Petrie. Budge, as keeper of the Egyptian collection of the British Museum, has been mentioned in passing in earlier volume of the series, such as *The Mummy Case*, and has already been revealed as a particular bete noir of Emerson's. Anecdotes concerning some of Budge's sharper dealings in antiquities are mentioned to no great approbation by Amelia, and to condemnation by Emerson. (In fact, the story of Budge's acquisition of the Luxor cachette of statues is based on fact.)

In *Deeds*, Budge is depicted (after Breasted) as a rather unprepossessing figure, and this unfortunate gentleman serves as the butt of several farcical scenes in the novel. Further comedic relief is provided by Mr. O'Connell, the Irishman journalist first introduced in *Curse*, and by his rivals in journalism (Miss Minton) and love (Mr. Wilson). As usual, there are several subplots to the mystery at hand, which involves a mysterious figure from Emerson's past.

After the first one, Elizabeth Peters's publisher "persuaded" her to retitle the Amelia Peabody books. Her original intention was to derive each title from an Egyptian text quoted in the story.

Thus *Crocodile on a Sandbank* owes its title to a line from a love poem on Cairo Ostracom 25218. *Curse* was meant to be called *Heart in the Cedar Tree*, the reference being to "The Tale of Two Brothers." This original title was vetoed by the publisher in favor of the more "popularly accessible" *Curse of the Pharaohs*. After *Mummy Case*, however, the publisher relented and *Lion in the Valley* once again makes reference to Egyptian literature. Peter's practice of titling has given rise to another source of enjoyment to her readers, as they recognize the sources of the texts quoted and ponder how these might relate to the mystery under consideration.

Both Amelia Peabody Emerson and her husband Radcliffe Emerson are given physical descriptions and attributes based on actual pioneering archaeologists. As mentioned above, the early field work of Flinders Petrie was the inspiration for much of the fictional excavating done by the Emersons. Radcliffe, however, also bears a marked resemblance to a young Petrie, being darkly handsome, black-haired and bearded. He shares, as well, the famous Egyptologist's meticulousness, disregard for comfort, tireless energy, cast-iron stomach and competitive nature, plus his less attractive characteristics – quick temper, stubbornness and dogmatism. (2) Emerson is called "Father of Curses" by his Egyptian workmen; Petrie bore the epithet, "Father of Pots."

Amelia is less obviously based on at least one historical character: a model for Peters's heroine is Amelia B. Edwards. Readers of *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* will recognize many of the elements of *Crocodile* as being inspired by Edwards's travel book. For example, the dahabiyehs used to sail up the Nile are both called the "Philae." "Lady Doctor" (Sitt Hakim) is the name given by the Egyptians to both the fictional Amelia and to Edwards's own traveling companion. Amelia Edwards was ten years older than her whodunit counterpart when she sailed to Egypt in 1877; but both the real woman and the fictional heroine decide to go up the Nile from a sense of adventure, rather than from an overriding interest in the antiquities of the country.

However, as the series progressed, Peters's inspiration for the development of Amelia Peabody Emerson's character was provided by Hilda Petrie. (3) Like Mrs. Emerson, the latter was something of a scholar and, like her, adored dig life. However, unlike the heroine of these stories, Hilda was totally undomestic, with little interest or knowledge of the day-to-day running of the "human" side of the dig, such as supervision of servants and meals. She was, like her fictional counterpart, known to dress in a number of innovative outfits, which ranged from striking to outrageous by late-Victorian standards. Lady Petrie sometimes wore Egyptian galabiyehs for comfort; but, more often, on the dig site she wore a knee-length tunic over a pair of knee-length knickers, plus a broad-brimmed hat. The photographs of her, however, show no trace of the remarkable tool belt supported by Amelia in her similar costume; nor can I distinguish whether Lady Petrie had her outfits made in crimson and other "cheerful shades that would not show the sand and dust," as favored by Mrs. Emerson.

As I write, I have it on good authority from Elizabeth Peters that another Amelia Peabody novel is in the works. Despite all bribes, threats and cajolery, I will refrain from revealing its subject matter, or what little I know of the plot. However, you may be sure I await its arrival with anticipation!

Notes.

1. Description of Lady Petrie's activities are taken from Margaret Drower, information concerning Amelia Edwards's visits to various monuments are from her *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile*.
2. The Character of Sir Flinders Petrie is reconstructed from several sources, including Margaret Drower's biography and the memoirs of Gertrude Caton-Thompson.
3. Lady Petrie's dress and character are also reconstructed from *Flinders Petrie*.

Numerous sources were used to research the background of the novels. Apart from various publications of excavations, Petrie's volumes of memoirs – *Seventy Years in Archaeology* (London, 1892) and *10 Years Digging in Egypt, 1881-1890* (London, 1931) – were used as was *Flinders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology*, Margaret S. Drower (London, 1985). Other memoirs, biographies and autobiographies were used as well, including: Gertrude Caton-Thompson, *Mixed Memoirs* (Galeshead, 1983); Amelia Edwards, *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (Second Edition: London, 1888). Also used as reference were: the many volumes of Porter and Moss, *Topographical Bibliography*; W.R. Dawson and E. Uphill, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*.
