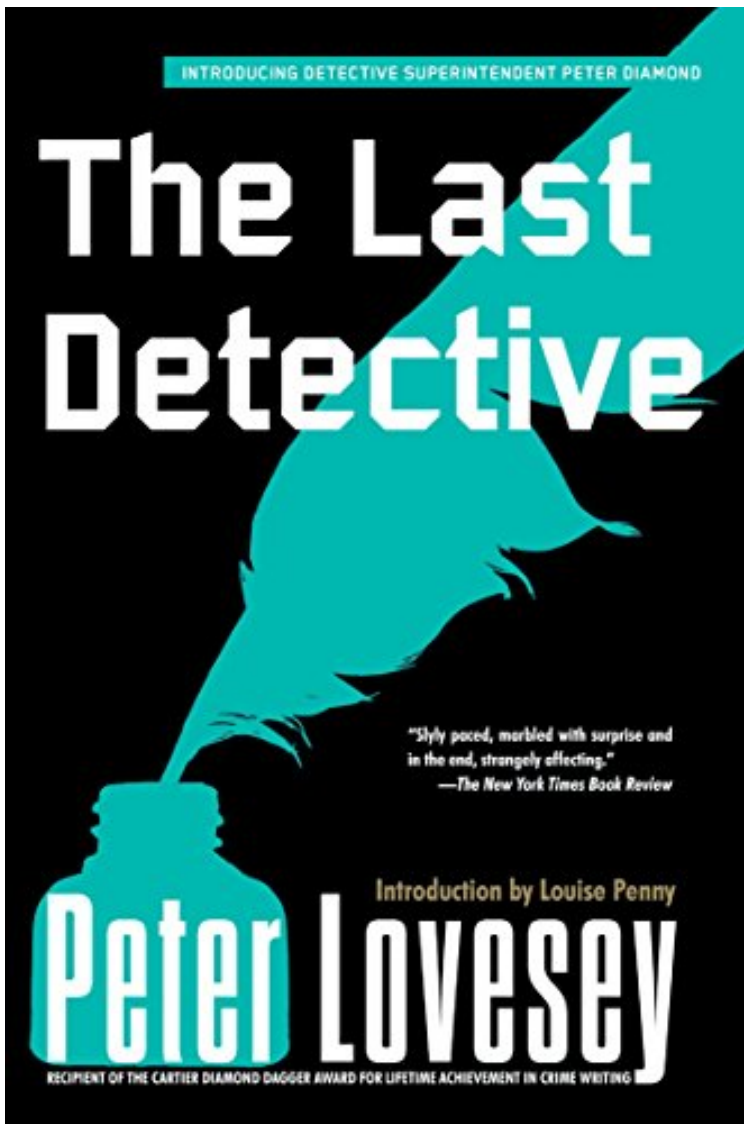


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# The Last Detective



Par Peter Lovesey  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIntroduction by Louise PennyA woman's body has been found floating in a large reservoir just south of Bristol. In order to solve the mystery of the "Lady in the Lake," Detective Superintendent Peter Diamond must locate two missing letters attributed to Jane Austen and defy his superiors on the force to save a woman unjustly accused of murder. This is the first of the Peter Diamond series; it won the 1992 Anthony Boucher Award for Best Mystery Novel.From the Trade Paperback edition.ExtraitONE A MAN STOOD THIGH-DEEP IN WATER, motionless,absorbed, unaware of what was drifting towards him. He wasfishing on the north shore of Chew Valley Lake, a 1200-acrereservoir at the foot of the Mendip Hills south of Bristol. Hehad already taken three brown trout of respectable weight.He watched keenly for a telltale swirl in the calm lakewhere he had cast. The conditions were

promising. It was an evening late in September, the sky was overcast and the flies in their millions had just whirled above him in their spectacular sunset flight, soaring and swooping over the lake in an amass darker and more dense than the clouds, their droning as resonant as a train in the underground. The days hatch, irresistible to hungry fish. A light south-westerly fretted the surface around him, yet ahead there was this bar of water, known to fishermen as the scum, that showed a different pattern in the fading light. There, he knew by experience, the fish preferred to rise. So preoccupied was the man that he failed altogether to notice a pale object at closer proximity. It drifted languidly in the current created by the wind, more than half submerged, with a slight rocking motion that fitfully produced a semblance of life. Finally it touched him. A white hand slid against his thigh. A complete arm angled outwards as the body lodged against him, trapped at the armpit. It was a dead woman, face-up and naked. The fisherman glanced down. From high in his throat came a childish shrill, indrawn cry. For a moment he stood as if petrified. Then he made an effort to gather himself mentally so as to disentangle himself from the undesired embrace. Unwilling to touch the corpse with his hands, he used the handle of the rod as a lever, lodging the end in the armpit and pushing the body away from him, turning it at the same time, then stepping aside to let it move on its way with the current. That accomplished, he grabbed his net from its anchorage in the mud and, without even stopping to reel in his line, splashed his way to the bank. There, he looked about him. No one was in sight. This angler was not public-spirited. His response to the discovery was to bundle his tackle together and move off to his car as fast as possible. He did have one judicious thought. Before leaving, he opened the bag containing his catch and threw the three trout back into the water.

TWO A LITTLE AFTER 10.30 THE same Saturday evening, Police Constable Harry Sedgemoor and his wife Shirley were watching a horror video in their terraced cottage in Bishop Sutton, on the eastern side of the lake. PC Sedgemoor had come off duty at six. His long body was stretched along the length of the sofa, his bare feet projecting over one end. On this hot night he had changed into a black singlet and shorts. A can of Malthouse Bitter was in his left hand, while his right was stroking Shirley's head, idly teasing out the black curls and feeling them spring back into shape. Shirley, after her shower dressed only in her white cotton nightie, reclined on the floor, propped against the sofa. She had her eyes closed. She had lost interest in the film, but she didn't object to Harry watching it if it resulted afterwards in his snuggling up close to her in bed, as he usually did after watching a horror film. Secretly, she suspected he was more scared by them than she, but you didn't suggest that sort of thing to your husband, particularly if he happened to be a policeman. So she waited patiently for it to end. The tape hadn't much longer to run. Harry had several times pressed the fast-forward button to get through boring bits of conversation. The violins on the video soundtrack were working up to a piercing crescendo when the Sedgemoors both heard the click of their own front gate. Shirley said bitterly, I don't believe it! What time is it? Her husband sighed, swung his legs off the sofa, got up and looked out of the window. Some woman. He couldn't see much in the porch light. He recognized the caller when he opened the door: Miss Trenchard-Smith, who lived alone in one of the older houses at the far end of the village. An upright seventy-year-old never seen without her Tyrolean hat, which over the years had faded in colour from a severe brown to a shade that was starting to fit in with the deep pink of the local stone. I hesitate to disturb you so late, Officer, she said as her eyes travelled over his shorts and singlet in a series of rapid jerks. However, I think you will agree that what I have found is sufficiently serious to justify this intrusion. Her gratingly genteel accent articulated the words with self-importance. She may have lived in the village since the war, but she would never pass as local and probably didn't care to. PC Sedgemoor said with indulgence, What might that be, Miss Trenchard-Smith? A dead body. A body? He fingered the tip of his chin and tried to appear unperturbed, but his pulses throbbed. After six months in the force he had yet to be called to a corpse. Miss Trenchard-Smith continued with her explanation. I was walking my cats by the lake. People don't believe that cats like to be taken for walks, but mine do. Every evening about this time. They insist on it. They won't let me sleep if I haven't taken them out. A human body, you mean? Well, of course. A woman. Not a stitch of clothing on her, poor creature. You'd better show me. Is it . . . is she nearby? In the lake, if she hasn't floated away already. Sedgemoor refrained from pointing out that the body would remain in the lake even if it had floated away. He needed Miss Trenchard-Smith's co-operation. He invited her into the cottage for a moment while he ran upstairs to collect a sweater and his personal radio. Shirley, meanwhile, had stood up and wished a good evening to Miss Trenchard-Smith, whose tone in replying made it plain that in her view no respectable woman ought to be seen in her nightwear outside the bedroom. What a horrid experience for you! Shirley remarked, meaning what had happened beside the lake. Would you care for a nip of something to calm you down? Miss Trenchard-Smith curtly thanked her and declined. But you can look after my cats while I'm gone,

she said as if bestowing a favour on Shirley. You don't mind cats, do you? Without pausing to get an answer she went to the door and called, Come on, come on, come on, and two Siamese raced from the shadows straight into the cottage and leapt on to the warm spot Harry had vacated on the sofa as if it were prearranged. When Harry came down again, Shirley glanced at what he was wearing and said, I thought you were going upstairs to put some trousers on. He said, I might have to wade in and fetch something out, mightn't I? She shuddered. He picked his torch off the shelf by the door. Managing to sound quite well in control, he said, Bye, love. He kissed Shirley lightly and tried to provide more reassurance by whispering, I expect she imagined it. Not that tough old bird, Shirley thought. If she says she found a corpse, it's there. Harry Sedgemoor was less certain. While driving Miss Trenchard-Smith the half-mile or so down to the lakeside he seriously speculated that she might be doing this out of a desire to enliven her placid routine with gratuitous excitement. Old women living alone had been known to waste police time with tall stories. If this were the case he would be incensed. He was damned sure Shirley wouldn't want to make love after this. Whatever there might or might not be in the lake, the mention of a corpse would colour her imagination so vividly that nothing he did or said would relax her. With an effort to be the policeman, he asked Miss Trenchard-Smith to tell him where to stop the car. Anywhere you like, she said with an ominously nonchalant air. I haven't the faintest idea where we are. He halted where the road came to an end. They got out and started across a patch of turf, his torch probing the space ahead. The reservoir was enclosed by a low boundary fence, beyond which clumps of reeds stirred in the breeze, appearing to flicker in the torchlight. At intervals were flat stretches of shoreline. How exactly did you get down to the water? he asked. Through one of the gates. Those are for fishermen only. I don't disturb them. She gave a laugh. I won't tell anyone you broke the law. He pushed open a gate and they picked their way down to the water's edge. Was this the place? She said, It all looks amazingly different now. Containing his annoyance, he drew the torch-beam slowly across a wide angle. You must have some idea. How did you notice the body? There was still some daylight then. Fifty yards along the bank was a place where the reeds grew extra tall. Anywhere like that? I suppose there's no harm in looking, she said. That's why we're here, miss. He stepped in and felt his foot sink into soft mud. You'd better stay where you are, he told Miss Trenchard-Smith. He worked his way through to the far side. Nothing was there except a family of ducks that put up a noisy protest. He returned. She said, Just look at the state of your gym shoes! We're looking for a body, miss, PC Sedgemoor reminded her. We've got to do the job properly. If you're going to wade through every clump of reeds, we'll be out all night, she said blithely. Twenty minutes searching resulted only in Miss Trenchard-Smith becoming more flippant and PC Sedgemoor less patient. They moved steadily along the shoreline. He shone the torch on his watch, thinking bitterly of Shirley alone in the cottage with those unlikeable cats while he danced attendance on this scatty old maid. Almost 11.30. What a Saturday night! In an impatient gesture he swung the beam rapidly across the whole width of the water as if to demonstrate the futility of the task. And perversely that was the moment when Miss Trenchard-Smith said, There! Where? Give me the torch, she said. He handed it to her and watched as she held it at arm's length. The beam picked out something white in the water. PC Sedgemoor took a short, quick breath. What do you know? he said in a whisper. You were right. The body had lodged among the reeds not more than ten feet from where they stood, in a place where waterweed, bright viridian in the torchlight, grew densely. Unquestionably a woman, face upwards, her long hair splayed in the water, a strand of it across her throat. The pale flesh was flecked with seedpods. No wounds were apparent. Sedgemoor was reminded of a painting he had once seen on a school trip to London: a woman lying dead among reeds, evidently drowned. It had impressed him because the teacher had said that the model had been forced to lie for hours in a bath in the artist's studio and one day the artist had forgotten to fill the lamps that were provided to keep the water warm. As a result the girl had contracted an illness that didn't immediately kill her, but certainly shortened her life. The story had been given to the class as an example of obsessive fidelity to the subject. Sedgemoor had stood in front of the painting until the teacher had called his name sharply from the next room, for it had been the only painting of a dead person he had seen, and death is fascinating to children. Now, faced with an actual drowned corpse, he was made acutely aware how idealized the Pre-Raphaelite image had been. It wasn't merely that the girl in the painting had been clothed. Her hands and face had lain elegantly on the surface of the water. The face of the real drowned woman was submerged, drawn under by the weight of the head. The belly was uppermost, and it was swollen. The skin on the breasts had a puckered appearance. The hands hung too low to be visible at all. There's a wind blowing up, said Miss Trenchard-Smith. Yes, he responded in a preoccupied way. If you don't do something about it, she'll drift away again. The duty inspector at F Division in Yeovil picked out the significant word from PC Sedgemoor's call. Naked meant a full alert. You can

generally rule out accident or suicide if you discover a naked corpse in a lake. And you say you handled it?

Was that necessary? All right, lad. Stay where you are. I mean that literally. Stand on the spot. Don't trample the ground. Don't touch the corpse again. Don't smoke, comb your hair, scratch your balls, anything. Sedgemoor was compelled to ignore the instruction. He hadn't cared to admit that he was calling in from the car, where he had stupidly left his personal radio. He set off at a trot, back to the lakeside. Miss Trenchard-Smith stood by the body in the darkness, sublimely unconcerned. I switched off the torch to save your battery. He told her that assistance was on the way and he would see that she was taken home shortly. I hope not, she said. I'd like to help. Decent of you to offer, miss, said Sedgemoor. With respect, the CID won't need any help. You were glad of it, young man. Yes. She was unstoppable. Women of her mettle had climbed the Matterhorn in long skirts and chained themselves to railings. They'll want to identify her, she said with relish. I'm no Sherlock Holmes, but I can tell them several things already. She was married, proud of her looks and her shoes pinched. And it appears to me as if she had red hair. It looked dark brown when you first brought her out, but I would say on closer examination that it was a rather fetching shade of chestnut red, wouldn't you? She switched on the torch and bent over the face admiringly as if it had none of the disfigurement caused by prolonged submersion. Nowonder she let it grow. Don't touch! Sedgemoor cautioned her. But she already had a lock of hair between finger and thumb. Just feel how fine it is. Don't be squeamish. It isn't that its procedure. You don't handle anything. She looked up, smiling. Come now, you just dragged her out of the water. Touching her hair won't make a jot of difference. I've had orders, he said stiffly.

And I must request you to co-operate. As you wish. She straightened up and used the torch to justify her deductions. The mark of a wedding ring on the left hand. Traces of nail polish on the toes as well as the fingernails. Cramped toes and redness on the backs of the heels. Neither a farmgirl nor a feminist, my dear Watson. Where are they? They ought to be here by now. It was with distinct relief that Sedgemoor spotted across the landscape the flashing light of a police vehicle. He swung the torch in a wide arc above his head. In a few bewildering minutes their sense of isolation was supplanted by activity on a scale the young constable had only ever seen in a training film. A panda car, two large vans and a minibus drove over the turf and halted and at least a dozen men got out. The area was cordoned off with white tapes and illuminated with arc-lamps. Two senior detectives approached the body and spent some time beside it. Then the scenes-of-crime officers moved in. The forensic team arrived. A photographer took pictures and a screen was erected. Miss Trenchard-Smith was led to the minibus and questioned about the finding of the body. The detective took more interest in her green Wellingtons than her deductions about the victim. The boots were borrowed, photographed and used to make casts. Then she was driven back to PC Sedgemoor's house. Sedgemoor was not detained much longer. He made his statement, surrendered his muddy trainers to the forensic examiners, waited for them to be returned and then left the scene and drove home. Miss Trenchard-Smith and her cats were still there when he arrived a few minutes after midnight. She was still there at 1.30 a.m., drinking cocoa and reminiscing about her days in the ambulance service during the war. As she graphically expressed it, sudden death was meat and drink to her. This was not the case with Harry Sedgemoor. He refused Shirley's offer of cocoa and went upstairs to look for indigestion tablets. He had to be on duty at eight next morning. From Publishers Weekly: Irascible, corpulent, cynical Chief Superintendent Peter Diamond of the Avon and Somerset murder squad attributes Britain's decline as a world power to the abolition of capital punishment in 1964. Spurning computer gadgetry, he sticks to common sense, index cards and gumshoeing: "Knocking on doors. That's how we get results." The almost clueless case of the naked woman's body found floating in Chew Valley Lake poses a supreme challenge for the detective, who is anxious to clear his name of recent charges of brutality. The belated identification of the victim as actress Geraldine Snoo, written out of a BBC soap opera two years before, leads to one surprise after another, including the claim of the victim's professor husband that she had tried to kill him, and culminating in the suspenseful trial of divorced mother Dana Didrikson whom Geraldine had accused of trying to steal her husband. Diamond refutes genetic fingerprinting evidence against Dana and, in a stunning last scene, reveals the killer's identity. Lovesy, winner of a Silver Dagger Award for *Waxwork* and a Golden Dagger for *The False Inspector Dew*, uses Bath as his setting, treating us to a great chase through the Roman baths for which the town is named. This witty novel gets the new Perfect Crime imprint (formerly Crime Club) off to a flying start. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.