

A nice day for a white wedding? On the Original Murder Weekend, the reception didn't go quite as planned — and our job was to find out why...

When the invitation came through for Zoe and Lawrie's White Wedding, I thought, *How lovely.* Bridesmaids and bouquets, champagne and confetti. I smiled as I packed my largest hat. Everybody loves a good wedding — surely it couldn't matter that I'd never met the bride and groom. Or that the hat I was packing was better suited to a fancy dress ball. Slightly more worrying, perhaps, was the nagging suspicion that somewhere in the beautiful Victorian hotel where the wedding was being held, a serial killer was on the loose...

Welcome to the flip side of the marital coin, a place where murder and mystery reign supreme. Welcome to the world of the murder-mystery weekend.

Not just any old murder weekend, though. This is the Original Murder Weekend, devised by the founder of the concept, Joy Swift, MBE. Now on her 102nd plot and — with 28 years' expertise in fictional foul play behind her — guaranteed to be a cracker.

My sister Nathalie and I arrived at Wotton House, Dorking, Surrey with high expectations and a suitcase full of hats and clothes. We were to attend a Mad Hatters Rehearsal Dinner as well as a Perfect Pairs Night over the course of the weekend.

Joy feels that dressing up gets guests involved. 'Fancy dress is a great leveller,' she explained.

I understood what she meant — with a half-metre-tall stripy hat on my head there was no point in being shy, so I figured I might as well chat to fellow guests.

'How do you know Zoe and Lawrie?' a lady in a pink three-tiered wedding cake affair asked us.

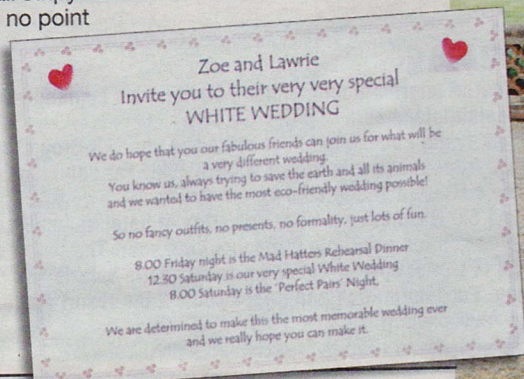
The plot starts the minute you walk through the



Left: Holmes put their on. Below aka Joy S her lesbia

MURDER most enter

Right: Mad Hatters Vicky (right) and Nathalie are all set for the Rehearsal Dinner, the night before Zoe and Lawrie's wedding. Below: the Original Murder Weekend invitation



door. We had left our... at home and were n... White Wedding. Zo... in the distance in g... while Lawrie was m... guests over buck's... 'Oh, er... we are... daughters that she... birth,' I blurted. 'Sh... we're here.'

From the depths... hat, Nats rolled her... 'No one will belie... said. 'We don't eve...

Judging from oth... were hearing, thou... that people might b...

Some explanatio... honed than others... that amidst all the... 'cousins' were plan...



Above: Wotton House in Dorking, Surrey, is an ideal spot for a wedding, but a serial killer is also on the loose. Left: Tamara's perfect day was stained by fatal bloodshed



ining

— some who were undoubtedly murderers, some who would become victims. Suddenly everyone fell under suspicion.

'I think he did it,' Nathalie said, pointing at a man in a flowery hat.

I explained that 'it' hadn't actually happened yet. We needed to wait until halfway through dinner — sometime after the salmon but before the chocolate fondant — for horrified screams to pierce the air.

We rushed outside to find Zoe lying fatally stabbed in a dark grotto, blood staining bridal white.

DI Rutherford and his sidekick Sergeant Darling were on the scene. Actors, we decided, already feeling a little more experienced. We'd identified 'Chris', who'd sat next to us at dinner, as an insider,

while the drunken woman who'd burst through the door earlier claiming to be Lawrie's first wife's twin sister was either insane or part of the plot.

As Zoe headed for the morgue, our notebook was rapidly filling up.

Gilly — actor. Chris is limping, why? Keep an eye on granny in shower cap.

So as not to waste a perfectly good wedding slot it was arranged that Zoe's sister Tamara (played by Joy Swift) would marry her lesbian lover in the morning. If the drunken registrar Les allowed it, that was, and assuming everyone survived.

The plot was racing along now and I couldn't stop smiling. It was all so far-fetched and bizarre, yet everyone was playing the game.

'The secret is to wait until Saturday night before trying to work it out,' a man in a fedora explained. He was a veteran of 33 murder-mystery weekends and had his wife and two teenage children in tow for this one.

I paid close attention. Apparently we should watch, listen and ask questions. All the actors involved in the plot were available for interrogation, while Rutherford and Darling had set up a police incident room with newspaper cuttings, letters and other clues to help the amateur sleuths piece everything together.

To go into it all would be to give it away. Suffice to say that by lunchtime on Saturday we were as confused as ever. We were also, it seemed, confusing other people, as it had emerged, in a strange twist, that Chris was Tamara's long-lost son, given away at birth.

No wonder he'd looked at us so strangely when we'd told him our 'alibi'. Not that it mattered any more, as before the end of lunch

he had turned up dead in the library with a laptop cable round his neck.

A serial killer so nasty he denied his victims their pudding...

Everyone was on tenterhooks. Who would be next?

Thankfully Tamara and Sonya's wedding passed without bloodshed and we retired to our room to mull over the plot.

'I can hear the people next door,' Nats said excitedly, her ear to the wall. 'They're discussing whodunit!'

To hear better she climbed into the wardrobe. By the time she emerged I had glued on my ginger sideburns and tied the flaps of my deerstalker.

'They think Les is the killer,' she said.

I shook my head. It was *obviously* Tamara.

At eight o'clock that evening Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson adjourned to the library.

Some were sharing information, and I spotted elaborate flow charts written in sparkly pink pen. Others were keeping their cards close to their chests. Down in the incident room more clues had appeared on the board, including an allusion to someone called 'Vicky'.

'I sat next to a girl called Vicky at dinner,' I overheard someone say, and grinned. We may not have solved the plot — but we'd thrown a few spanners into the works!

More revelations and a fight took place over dinner but no murders. Lemon pie came and went and everyone seemed intact. Except... except... where was Tamara?

Watson, keen to intercept a murder before it happened, pricked up her moustache and disappeared



Sergeant Darling and Sherlock Holmes mull things over

into the dark night.

I spoke to Nigel, a black box engineer and dab hand at mull solving, hoping that I might be able to crib something from his professional-looking notebook. But before I could, there was commotion outside and Tamara appeared.

A large knife was sticking out of her chest while she leant, dying against... Watson!

'I found her and then she started spurting blood from her mouth,' Nats said excitedly. 'It was gr...

Unfortunately she hadn't spotted the murderer. Now that our prime suspect was dead we were back to square one.

A late night in the incident room failed to shed more light, and a deadline of 10.30am on Sunday the great detective and his sidekick had to admit defeat.

The solution was announced at a midday press conference to groans — and celebration.

I'm not sure who it was — certainly not that in hindsight it was glaringly obvious. The family had guessed it right, as had Nats.

'It was all so elementary,' I said, kicking myself as I packed our disguises.

Neither of us was quite ready to leave the strange, fantastic world

we'd been in and step back into 'reality'. It had been chaotic and crazy, exhausting and fun. It was also incredibly compulsive.

'Next time we'll solve it,' Nats said, shaking her fist as we drove away. You can defeat Watson once. The second time, would you murderers, beware.

Vicky H



The queen of murder mystery, Joy Swift

Here we go!

Joy Swift's Original Murder Weekends are run exclusively at Principal Hayley Hotels. For brochure request and bookings or other enquiries e-mail joy@murder.co.uk, call 0151 924 1124 or visit the web www.murder.co.uk