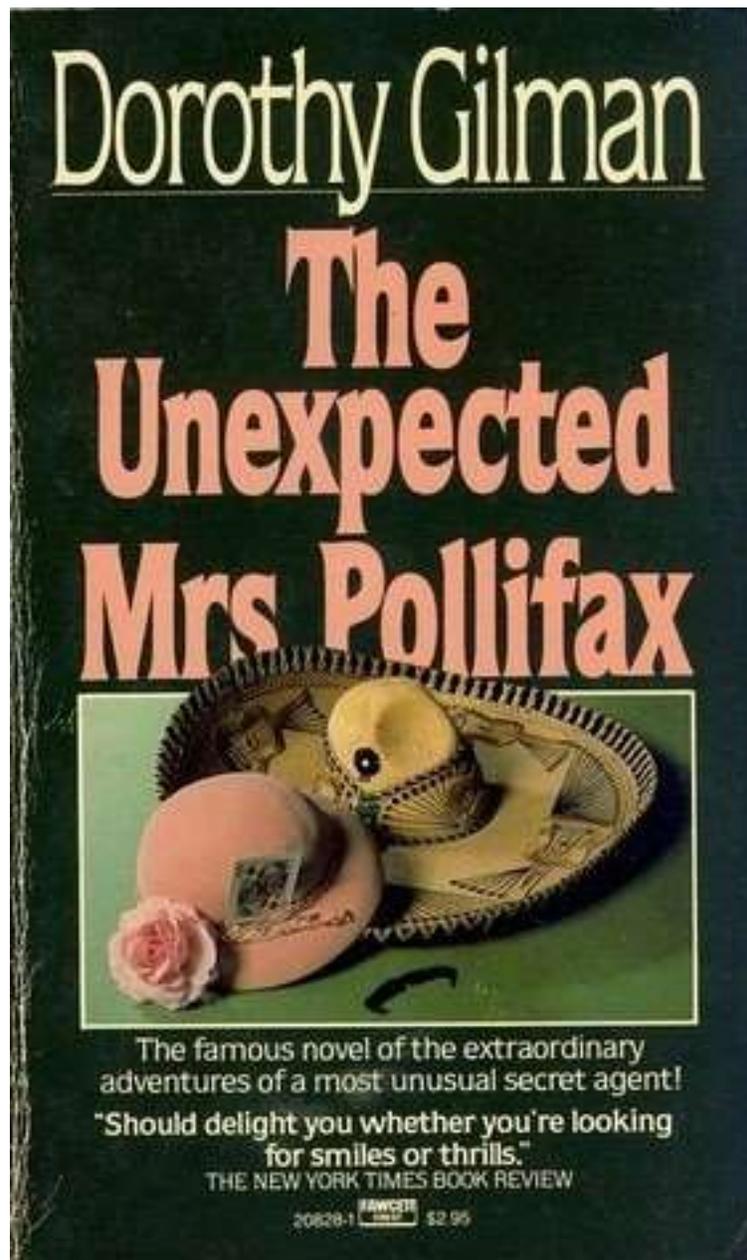


Dorothy Gilman (1923-2012): *The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax* (1966)



*The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax* begins with a visit to the doctor (“a very nice young man”). Mrs. Pollifax discovers that she is amazingly healthy, which news she finds not altogether welcome. Why not? Because her life has no meaning or purpose—to the point that when last carrying her geraniums to the roof, she “had stood at the edge of the parapet looking down, her mind searching for one good reason why she should not take a step forward into oblivion” (Chapter 1, page 8 in the 1970 Fawcett Crest paperback edition). It is only the frightened cry of a neighbor that recalls her to herself and causes her to step back.

Despite this somewhat bleak start (although Gilman manages to get over this ground lightly), *The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax* is basically a happy book (as are the thirteen novels that follow, although some are darker than others). Mrs. Pollifax decides to combat her sense of uselessness by serving her country as a spy, and presents herself at CIA headquarters in Langley, VA. Due to a mix-up she is hired as a courier and her adventures begin.

The series is enjoyable; Gilman is an excellent writer. But what strikes me most now, thinking about the Pollifax books, is that they were the first books I read where an older woman—a widower and grandmother—was not just the main character (I had read Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple books), but had an interior life and a point of view that were shared with the reader.

Mrs. Pollifax doesn’t have everything figured out. She’s lived the life that was expected of her, but in the first book she realizes she has more expectations of life. Her grown children regard her with fond exasperation, as did her late husband. When she decides to add a new dimension to her life by becoming a spy, she learns she is resourceful, courageous, resilient, and capable of physical endurance.

You don’t stop learning, growing, or living because you age. I first read these books in junior high, so in my early teens. I can’t help but think that this fictional example of an older woman living a full, adventurous life has been good for me, especially as I myself near Mrs. Pollifax’s age. Her inner life has value and interest. She stays as mentally and physically active as her years and her capabilities permit. Emily Pollifax is always the center, the heroine of her story—not the helper, the adviser, the foil, or the obstacle. How unexpected.