

Penny, for her thoughts

Townships author discusses her work

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

North Hatley's Hovey Manor is well-known as a luxury country hotel with an award-winning cuisine, located in a tranquil setting. Less well known is that it is also the site for Louise Penny's latest novel, *The Murder Stone*. Following the launch of her novel there recently I caught up with Louise and her husband Michael. Considering that she was on the cusp of her fourth book launch in as many years she looked surprisingly relaxed, and as we sat by the fire in her elegant suite overlooking Lake Massawippi on a fine Autumn day we chatted about her book, her plans for future novels, and her views on the writing process.

Settling into a comfortable armchair, I began with a question I knew was on many readers' minds. Louise has often said that her protagonist, Inspector Armand Gamache, is modeled on her husband Michael. I asked her if that meant that Gamache's wife, Reine-Marie, is based on herself, or someone she knows.

"Oh, I think Reine-Marie is my idealized me," she replied. "It's me in many ways that I wish I was. I'm much less patient, and I'm more energetic. She's his calm center, his island of confidence. She's the ideal mother, much as Armand is the ideal father in some ways."

"So she's really taken out of thin air?" I asked.

"Yes, she was. And it really came as a surprise, because I really hadn't thought

about him married until I wrote the scene in which he shows up, and he gets the phone



Jim Napier with Louise and Michael

call summoning him to a case, and suddenly she's there. I knew immediately that I wanted him to have a loving relationship with his wife, but I didn't realize she would show up quite that soon, and now, in this book, of course in *The Murder Stone* she's front and center."

My curiosity was piqued. "So your writing has evolved over the last several novels as your characters take on a life of their own?"

"I hope so," she replied. "For me what's changed is my confidence. When I wrote the first book I was full of insecurities. By the second book I was just overwhelmed with fear, because the first book had been so well received I thought, oh well, how am I ever going to top this? But by the third book, and then with the fourth and the fifth, that all disappeared. Some writers describe needing that lash of fear to drive them on, and take them to a dark place. I don't.

What gives me creativity and makes me a better writer is calm, and peace, and confidence to go where I need to go.”

I shifted in my chair to face her more directly. “So has your perception of yourself as an author, and what you want from your books, changed from three years ago?”

“Oh, yes. Very much so. Three years ago I didn’t know if I was a one-hit wonder, and if I’d put everything in that I should have. Of course, I said I was a writer, and I was a writer for many years. But I’m Ok with that. It doesn’t depend on being published. It’s self-defining. So I knew I was a writer long before I had anything published, but I didn’t know whether I could sustain it. And now I do, and it’s a great feeling.”

“A lot of the appeal of your earlier books has focused on the cozy village and quirky residents of Three Pines,” I said, and asked if she had any plans for taking Gamache further afield, perhaps to more exotic settings.

Louise smiled. “I do. My plan, although it’s not being carried out just as I’d originally thought, was to have every second book set in Three Pines, and give the village, and me, a break. Because when I go back to it I want to see it with fresh eyes, and that love I really feel for the village. Which was really the purpose of bringing Gamache to the Manoir: to show him in a different environment and bring in new characters, but at the same time retain some of the elements of Three Pines. But book five, which is called *The Brutal Telling*, is set squarely in the village, and book six will be set mostly in Quebec City during Carnival, with about a third set in Three Pines.”

“Like many of your readers when I first took up your books I was thirsting for more information about Gamache,” I said. “In the earlier novels we learn that Gamache has

unresolved issues with another senior officer in the Sureté; and in *The Murder Stone* we learn that his father had a controversial past.” I asked her if readers were going to be treated to more such tidbits parceled out in future novels, and whether she’d thought about extending the backstory to include Reine-Marie and her family.

“No, I haven’t actually,” She admitted. “I’ve thought about extending it more to Gamache’s children. But I am hoping that with each book there’s a little bit more revealed. It’s one of those things I really struggle with, and I’m not sure I’ll ever find just the right balance.

“So without giving away too much,” I asked, “where next for Gamache?”

“In the sixth book, which I’m just charting out now, something serious will happen to him, and the novel will begin halfway through, as he’s dealing with this personal disaster while he’s in Quebec City. I get deeper and deeper into what makes Gamache the man he is.”

“I know readers will be following his exploits with interest,” I said, and left Louise and Michael to enjoy some private moments at a quiet country inn before heading back to the hectic pace that goes with being one of Canada’s most successful novelists.

More information about Louise and her books can be found at her website, <http://www.louisepenny.com>

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