

Jim Napier with Phyllis Smallman

A Killing in the Keys

Florida crime writer scores a hit

by Jim Napier, crime fiction reviewer

Phyllis Smallman is the newest luminary on the crime writing scene. Shortlisted for the British Debut Dagger Award for Best First Novel in 2004, she went on to garner the first Arthur Ellis Award for best unpublished novel from the Crime Writers of Canada, a prize established by bestselling Canadian author Louise Penny in 2007. But although she is new to the crime writing scene, Phyllis spins an entertaining tale with style and panache.

Recently I caught up with Phyllis in Toronto during a lull at Bloody Words, the annual Canadian crime writing festival, where she appeared on a panel discussing successful first novels. We talked about her work, her success, and crime writing in general.

"It's amazing," she said. "Nothing prepared me to walk up in front of two hundred people and say something. Because, you know, as a writer you work on your own. Right away there was the shock of having to get up and go get it. It goes from nothing to everything; that's the difference it makes in your life. Having a dream come true. And then when you get your book published, it moves to yet another level. So it just went from down here to up here," she said, gesturing toward the heavens. "And it's been a terrific learning experience, because first you have to learn to write a book, and then you have to get through all the things that come with it. I wasn't prepared for any of those things.

I noted that one of the biggest challenges facing a new novelist is creating a distinctive style, something that will grab the readers'—and a publisher's—attention. I asked her what was the key to her success. She said "People often ask me, what is the book about? That's the wrong question. They should ask, who is your book about? Because it's all about the characters, isn't it? That's what we remember from books. I'm so grateful to Crime Writers of Canada because I might not have ever been published without them. I was shortlisted in England for the Debut Dagger for best unpublished work and shortlisted for the Malice Domestic Award in the U.S., all for the same book. And then I won the Unchanged Arthur in Canada, and McArthur and Company offered to publish it! So it is an entry into the market. Writers usually think of getting an agent first, but it is another way of getting into the market, of getting known."

You're absolutely right, I said: character is crucial. I asked her to describe the protagonist, Sherri Travis. "Sherri Travis is a bartender who has a lot of problems. She's had a lot of bad luck, some of it of her own making. She is an ordinary person caught in extraordinary circumstances. Her life is at a turning point and all she is

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trying to do is survive. I like to see ordinary people and how they deal with extraordinary problems. Friends are important to her, and they come to her aid, and she to their aid, too, and that's what's important in her life. And the conversations come out of her world. They complain to each other, they whine to each other, they laugh together, and you see how they share their lives. But there's more to her. She's not a superhero. She has a very strong everyday quality about her, combined with a lot of moxie and not a little sassiness."

After reading the novel I couldn't help but ask if Sherri was based on anyone in real life. "Actually, I got my inspiration from a hairdresser down in Florida, she said. "She was fantastic. She had this wonderful Southern voice, and she had a real attitude, you know. People came early to their appointments just to listen to her. She'd riff on her husband: she'd be cutting someone's hair and she'd wave her scissors around and say 'One day, sugar, I'm going to cut more than that man's hair!' She was right out there with all the problems in her life but she did it with humour, and you'd walk away thinking, well, I guess things aren't so bad in my life. A sense of humour is so important: the way to survive life is to laugh at it, and that's what Sherri does."

She certainly has her work cut out for her in *Margarita Nights*, I said. She's the prime suspect in a murder case, and while she's attempting to clear herself someone wants to do her great bodily harm. I asked Phyllis whether Sherri is going to be the basis for a series of novels, or if the next book would be a standalone, dealing with a different set of characters. "Well, I already have three books in the series finished, and I am working on a standalone at the moment," she answered. "But Sherri has more things to do. I think the third one will be the best of all. Sherri is growing, and so am I. We're growing together, and I can see changes in her, more strengths. And that's really wonderful, because she has become like a real person to me. I can hear her voice, and see how she's dressed—very badly dressed" she laughed.

I asked Phyllis whether she'd noticed any changes in her approach to writing, her sense of craft, or how she puts a story together, now that she's finished her first book. "Yes," she agreed. "I finished that story four years ago, and I got to know the character better. I think I've become a little more serious about plot, and I think I've become a better writer." I found that interesting because *Margarita Nights* is a very accomplished book, full of confident writing, and doesn't read at all like a first novel. Confessing to having done many rewrites, and like many authors to having written books that may never see the light of day, she admitted that she'd learned a lot from the process. "Actually, becoming a published writer is as much about endurance as it is about talent! (laughs) You know, you just have to hang in there and you'll get better and more comfortable with it all."

When asked about her own creative process Phyllis said she thinks about writing all the time, a revealing trait shared by virtually all successful authors. "I have a little book," she said, "and I write down all the characters, their background, their characteristics, everything—stuff that will never get into the book—and I really get to know them, and I write it all down, even conversations that at the moment don't make any sense but I know will come in later. And maybe the ending will come first to me. For instance I've got a wonderful idea for the next book—maybe I shouldn't discuss that! Anyway, Sherri's in the bar, and there's a pickup in the parking lot, covered by a tarp, and it's been there for two days, and you just know something's wrong. That image came to me and I thought, you know, Florida is the best place to write about. You just have to open a paper and there are stories like that. On the local golf course they have a sign: Do not molest the alligators. Now, how on earth would you molest an alligator? And who would, and why? So yes, pretty quickly I have an idea for a story, and I know where I want to get to, but sometimes I don't know how I'm going to get there. You take things and weave them together, and somehow you manage to pull it all together into a coherent whole."

Of course, character and dialogue are not everything, and one thing that sets a good novel apart is the skillful use of setting. Fortunate to live in both Salt Spring Island, B.C. and Florida, I asked Phyllis whether she anticipated giving one of her stories a

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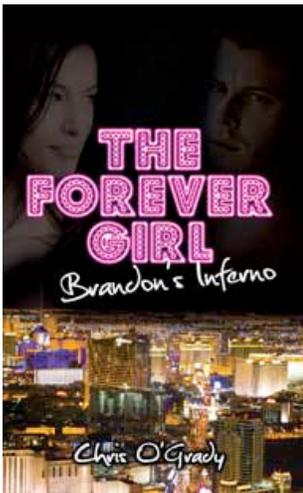
Canadian setting. "I've already started one," she replied, "about a homeless woman in B.C. Actually, it's pretty well finished. It started because I wondered, what would have happened if Janis Joplin had lived? What would have become of her? She would have been on the streets, I'm sure, and I wondered how she would get there. You don't just say at some point, I'm going to be a homeless person. Your parents didn't raise you to do that, did they? We know it's about drugs and mental illness and bad life choices. So if Janis Joplin had lived, she might be singing on a street corner somewhere. I met this woman with long grey hair, and she was living in her car, and I thought, we walk down the street and we feel comfortable and safe, but we're not, we're not safe out here. So she became the character for this book."

Already quite prolific as a debut author, Phyllis admits that her books have kind of stacked up. "I have three in the Sherri Travis series finished, a fourth half finished, and a standalone that needs some work," she admitted. "That will be up to the publisher. I don't think we have too much control over when and how things come out. The next Sherri Travis is called *Sex in a Sidecar*," she laughed, "and the third one is *A Brewski for the Old Man*. It's a little different. It's about 'gator poaching. Alligators are actually very valuable."

Alligator poaching? I made a note not to miss it.

Phyllis Smallman is the award-winning author of *Margarita Nights*, which is published by McArthur and Company (2008).

Jim Napier regularly reviews contemporary crime fiction in a column titled *Suspended Sentences*, published by the Sherbrooke Record. His reviews and interviews are also available on the internet. He can be reached at jim.napier52@gmail.com



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