

For Whom the Belle Toils

An old flame returns

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Love and loss; we've all experienced it. Things that were, and those that only might have been.

But what if someone from the past suddenly reappears in one's life? Can paths not taken be walked again? This week's pick looks at what happens when an old flame returns from out of the blue, in the third and concluding novel in the Belle Palmer series.

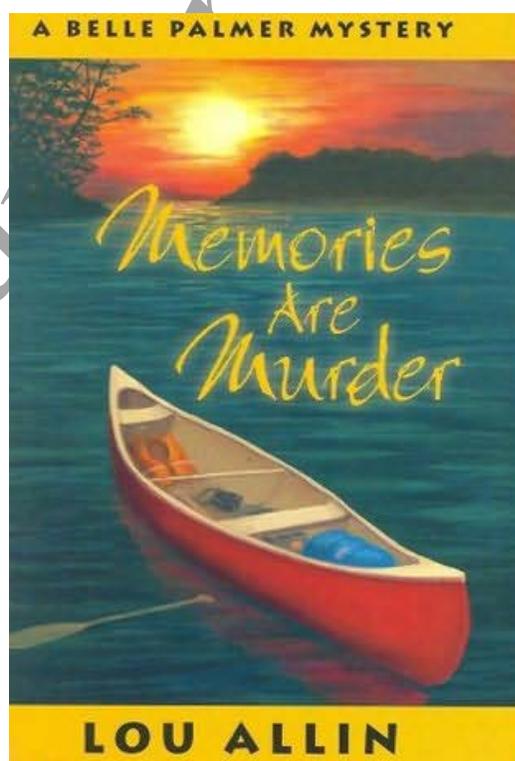
Lou Allin

She might be one of Canada's best-kept secrets, eschewing the more familiar (and clichéd) big-city settings for stories rooted in the Canadian wilderness that she clearly loves. But make no mistake: Lou Allin is a skilled and accomplished Canadian writer, with a host of short stories, poetry, and no less than five novels to her credit. Born in Toronto, for many years Lou taught writing and criminal justice at Cambrian College and lived on a lake near Sudbury, Ontario, where, as she puts it, men are men and moose take pre-cautions. Lou currently lives with her mini-poodle and her border collie on Vancouver Island, overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, where the rain forest meets the sea.

Memories are Murder (RendezVous Press, 2007)

Belle Palmer runs a small, independent real estate agency in Sudbury, Ontario. When her assistant is called away by a

family crisis, she lands Belle with a temp: Yoyo Hourtovenko is a bottle blonde with cropped, pink-gelled hair, given to wearing sparkly miniskirts and flamboyant tops. She arrives at Belle's office with a German Shepherd in tow; and she's pregnant—Yoyo, not the dog.



Starved for business, Belle gets a call one day from a zoologist looking for a house to rent while he does field research on endangered wildlife in the North. Normally her clients are looking to sell their properties, but one of her listings has been on the market for some

time, lying vacant. Belle reckons the owners might prefer renting than having no income at all, so she decides to show it to him.

Like the song goes, it's a small world after all: the zoologist turns out to be Gary Myers, an old flame from their high school days. At first it's a bit awkward for each of them, since the relationship went nowhere despite Belle's total infatuation with him at the time; but the pieces fall into place when he tells her that he's gay, and always has been.

An intimate relationship out of the way, they begin to rekindle their friendship. Gary tells her about his partner, a man named Malcolm Malloy, an impossibly-handsome mystery writer who goes by the nickname Mutt.

Belle rents Gary the house, and when he goes off into the woods to conduct his research Belle thinks nothing of it. But later that week Mutt Malloy calls Belle, explaining that he's been trying to reach Gary without success. Belle and Mutt explore some of the bush trails Gary might have taken, but without success.

The next morning Mutt calls Belle again. Gary is dead; a helicopter has spotted his overturned canoe in a nearby lake, his body not far away. Belle is devastated: Gary had come into and gone out of her life so quickly.

Stopping for coffee Belle runs into Steve Davis, an old friend and local detective. She mentions her new temp and is shocked to learn that Yoyo recently got out of prison for forging cheques to feed her gambling addiction! Belle freezes. She'd given Yoyo the company cheque-book to pay some bills. Has what little remained in her already-stretched bank account gone south with Yoyo? Racing

back to the office she is relieved to find Yoyo is on the straight and narrow; in fact she's succeeded in drumming up interest in several of Belle's listings.

Temporarily mollified, Belle shifts her attention to her father George, who's in a home for the aging. He's not doing well, developing blisters on his hands and legs. She resolves to speak with his doctor. Like all of us, George has his good days and bad days, and Belle worries about his future.

When the autopsy indicates that there was undigested alcohol in Gary's stomach and a bruise on his head, Belle's detective friend is inclined to close the case: Gary had been drinking and fell out of his canoe, striking his head: death by misadventure. Belle doesn't buy it, and resolves to probe further. Soon Mutt learns that the police are looking into his relationship with Gary. They discover that Mutt is the sole beneficiary of Gary's estate, which includes a pricey house in St. Catherine's, some investments, and an insurance policy that paid a double indemnity for accidental death. Could he be behind Gary's death?

Things go from bad to worse when Belle's brake lines are cut. A suspect is not hard to find: Belle has turned in a local polluter who turned out to have a long police record, and who threatened Belle for her interference.

They say trouble comes in threes, and it is not long before a blocked propane heater in Gary's house nearly asphyxiates Mutt. When the house is burgled and Gary's research notes are rifled, Belle rethinks her suspicions. They look into Gary's research: could something he found in the field have provided a motive for murder?

Belle resolves to check out a mining site that Gary had visited, and Yoyo insists on going along. It is a decision that will put both their lives in peril.

A fitting finish

There are any number of Canadian crime writers who draw on the splendid isolation of the north woods regions of Canada for the settings for their novels, but no one does it better than Lou Allin. Interesting characters in a fast-paced plot leading to a gripping climax make this a novel well worth reading. Firmly anchored by a strong sense of place and a crisp, no-nonsense style of writing, and laced with undercurrents of regret for Belle's father's declining condition, *Memories of Murder* is a fitting finish to the Belle Palmer series.

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