

For kids of all ages

Canadian pens prize-winning crossover

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Books for kids, versus books about kids, written for adults; it's a gap not easily breached. This week's pick does exactly that, and in the process serves up a delicious tale that is part puzzle, part time travel, and entirely captivating.

Reflecting the view that in earlier times children were to be "seen but not heard," until well into the twentieth century child detectives were largely nonexistent. When they were introduced their creators soon capitalized on the fact that, in an adult world, children were largely invisible. This meant that they could focus on sleuthing, overlooked by the adults around them. And since children posed a threat to adult hierarchical structures, turning a blind eye to their observations also could be exploited as a dramatic device, by placing the child detective in jeopardy.

One of the earliest crime novels featuring a child sleuth was 1929's *Emil and the Detectives*, written by Erich Kaestner. British literary critic Christopher Routledge has noted that for today's readers perhaps one of the oddest features of Kaestner's novel is its description of large groups of children wandering freely about the streets of pre-war Berlin. Emil and his friends seem to be

ignored by the adults around them as insignificant. This week's author capitalizes on this fact in a period tale of a disarming eleven-year old girl with a nose for puzzles and a passion for poisons.



Author Alan Bradley has penned a "refreshingly original tale."

Yet another of those overnight-successes-who-toiled-for-decades, Alan Bradley has written many children's stories as well as lifestyle and arts columns in Canadian newspapers. His adult stories have been broadcast on CBC Radio and published in various literary journals.

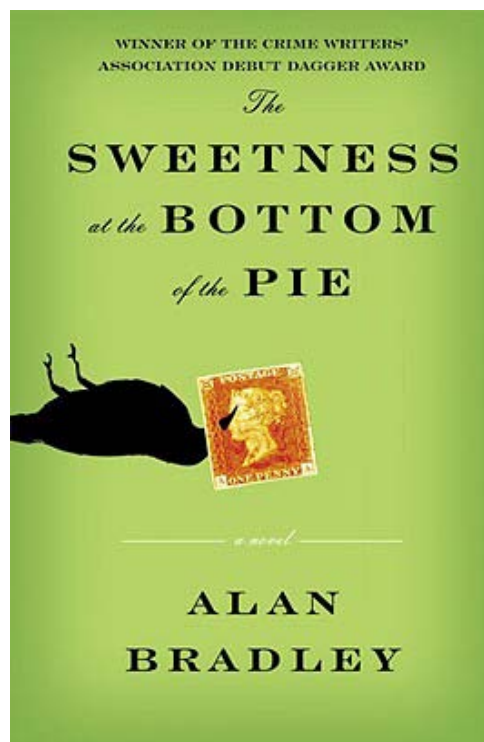
His earlier novels include *The Shoebox Bible* and, with co-author William A. S. Sargeant, *Ms Holmes of Baker Street*, a book that ignited a fierce controversy over their playful suggestion—supported by painstaking argumentation—that the fictional Great Detective had actually been a woman.

Bradley's rise to fame and global success began innocently enough. His wife was listening to CBC Radio when she heard Townships author Louise Penny talk about how her first book, *Still Life*, had been shortlisted for the Debut Dagger, and referred to the website describing the Dagger. Bradley's wife wrote down the information, gave it to him, and suggested he enter the competition. Bradley submitted the first fourteen pages, the first chapter of the manuscript that would become a prize-winning first novel. The story was set in England, the roots of his family, although Bradley had never been there. "And that is how I came to win," he says. "It's all a bit of a blur since. I can't remember exactly how many countries have bought the book based on that first chapter, but it is a lot."

Something of an understatement: Orion published *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* in the UK in January 2009, and at age 69, on the strength of a handful of pages, Bradley suddenly found himself penning the first of a three-book deal, published in thirteen countries and ten languages, along with audiobook and large-print editions. Like his pie, life is sweet.

Alan Bradley and his wife Shirley share their home in Kelowna, BC

with two calculating cats.



*The Sweetness at the Bottom
of the Pie*
(Doubleday, 2009)

It's the summer of 1950 at Buckshaw, the decaying ancestral home of the de Luces. Eleven-year-old Flavia is waging a never-ending battle of wits with her sisters, Ophelia and Daphne, who resort to such time-honoured measures as gagging and blindfolding Flavia, tying her up and secreting her in the attic just before dinner. But Flavia is equal to the challenges of her siblings, and resolves to extract payment in kind; and as a budding chemist, with all sorts of noxious potions at her disposal, she is sure to get her own back.

But ominous portents are in the air. First the family discovers a dead jack snipe on their doorstep—with, curiously, a postage stamp impaled

on its beak. Later that evening Flavia overhears an argument between a person unknown and her reclusive father, Colonel de Luce. She hears enough to know that they know each other well, but before she can fathom who the stranger is or what they are arguing about, Dogger, the taciturn family gardener, discovers Falvia in the hallway and sends her scurrying back to her room.

In the middle of the night Flavia awakens and pays a midnight visit to the kitchen. Noticing that a slice is missing from a pie on the windowsill, she ventures into the garden to see who might have taken it. In the dark she stumbles, and falls headlong into the cucumbers, where she discovers a dying man. With his last breath he utters but one word, *Vale*.

In the ensuing investigation the police learn that the victim, one Horace Bonepenny, was at school with Flavia's father, and when he is taken away by the police, it is up to Flavia to get to the bottom of things. She can only hope that the killer is not anyone close to home.

A captivating tale with an engaging sleuth

Flavia de Luce is a precocious, outspoken, and obsessively nosy child, a mix far more appealing on the printed page than it would be in real life (think Anne of Green Gables meets Nancy Drew). That said, she is an engaging figure whose indefatigable ability to break down the barriers between childhood and the adults around her totally seduces the reader. It is a sad commentary on our times that in today's world Falvia would undoubtedly be diagnosed as having ADHD and prescribed a tranquilizer.

With a cast of colourful characters, some deft plotting worthy of Dame Agatha herself, and a fastidious attention to period detail and dialogue, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* is one of the most entertaining novels I've read in a very long time. Alan Bradley has served up a beguiling tale that will appeal to readers of all ages. Not to be missed!

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