

Murder in the Monastery

Louise Penny launches latest Gamache

Suspended Sentences

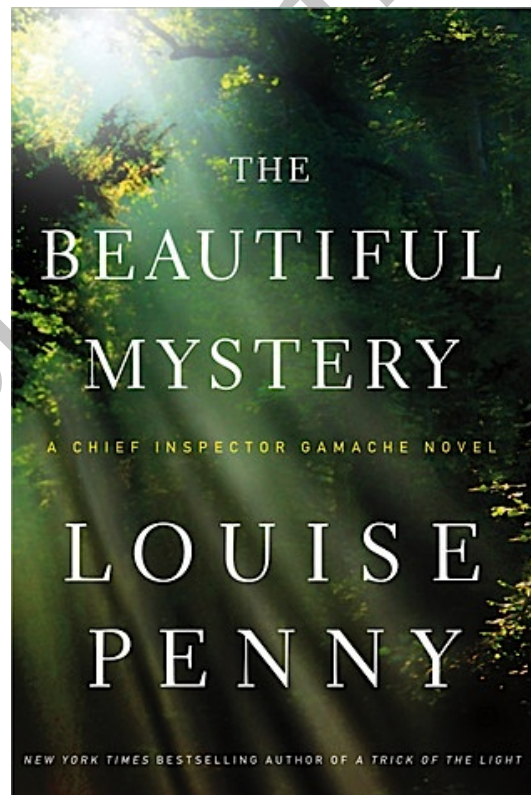
by Jim Napier

Montreal on a lazy Saturday: normally a day of rest for Armand Gamache and his homicide team. But this is no ordinary Saturday. Gamache has been summoned to investigate the death of a simple monk in a remote monastery near La Mauricie, Québec. A man concerned only with making music—an activity, one would have thought, about harmony above all else. But as Gamache will discover, there is little harmony in this particular setting.

IN THE CLOISTERED COMMUNITY of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups, plain-song chants mark the eight stages of daily life among the two dozen members that make up the tiny sect. Over time the Church had strayed from these simpler songs; one monk had sought to restore them to their original form, but it would not be an easy task.

Moreover, the quest is not without its perils. The tension between the old and the new has touched off a conflict among members of the religious order, who have become famous as a result of their recordings. Some had sided with the Abbot, who favoured retaining the order's cloistered life; but others shared the view of the choirmaster, Brother Mathieu, who saw the public passion for the

monk's music as the means of salvation for the order, which was faced with crippling expenses.



Even so, it is surprising when one of their own is found dead. When Gamache and Jean-Guy Beauvoir arrive at the remote site they learn that Brother Mathieu had been bludgeoned to death in the Abbot's walled garden, the murder weapon nowhere in sight.

WITH NO WITNESSES and very few clues, the case poses a challenge to

the seasoned investigators. It will be further complicated by the arrival of a mysterious emissary from Rome, and the unexpected appearance of a senior officer, with his own agenda, from the Sûreté.

Recently I had an opportunity to talk with Louise, and I mentioned the impressive amount of research that must have gone into the book, involving as it does details of monastic life combined with an informed account of historical religious music. She said that much of her research had been on the ground. "Michael and I visited St-Benoit-du-Lac. As we experienced the different services throughout the day, I became more and more mesmerized by the music. It was very, very calming. Slowly the turmoil of my daily life fell away, and I began to feel this sort of settled peace, especially in the last service of the day, when it was just us and the monks. I could see why the music, and the contemplative life, are transformative." Louise emphasized that in her book "the monks are not of that order, and it is definitely not set in St. Benoit. That would be both unfair to the monks and to me. I needed to create a whole new order and a fictional setting, in order to do what the story demanded."

Louise has been alternating the settings for her recent novels between the village of Three Pines and other

locations in Quebec. I asked whether the next Gamache would return to Three Pines, and whether she could give readers a hint of where Gamache might go after that. She replied that yes, the next one will be set in Three Pines, but admitted that "I just love introducing readers around the world to parts of Quebec. I'm looking at Gaspé and Charlevoix as possible future locations. Perhaps the lower north shore or Magdalan Islands. I feel like a child in a literary candy store," she beamed.

GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH, building on the ongoing backstory of Gamache's battle within the Sûreté, and the developing personal relationship between Beauvoir and Gamache's daughter, Annie, Louise Penny's writing has become more assured with what has become her signature style, at once descriptive and reflective, literal, yet packed with imagery.

Penny is fond of saying that setting is character, and nowhere is that more true than in *The Beautiful Mystery*. It's a tale that could have been woven by Agatha Christie herself, with a remote and atmospheric setting, a closed circle of suspects, and a classic locked-room mystery, made all the more intriguing by the introduction of sub-plots and hidden agendas. Her many fans are in for a real treat.

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