

# Townships Author Commits Murder

## *Suspended Sentences*

by Jim Napier

A real treat this week: a first novel by a Townshipper – and set in l’Estrie as well! Former CBC journalist Louise Penny serves up a delicious tale of pastoral village life, liberally seasoned with greed, jealousy, remorse, and murder.

### *Louise Penny*

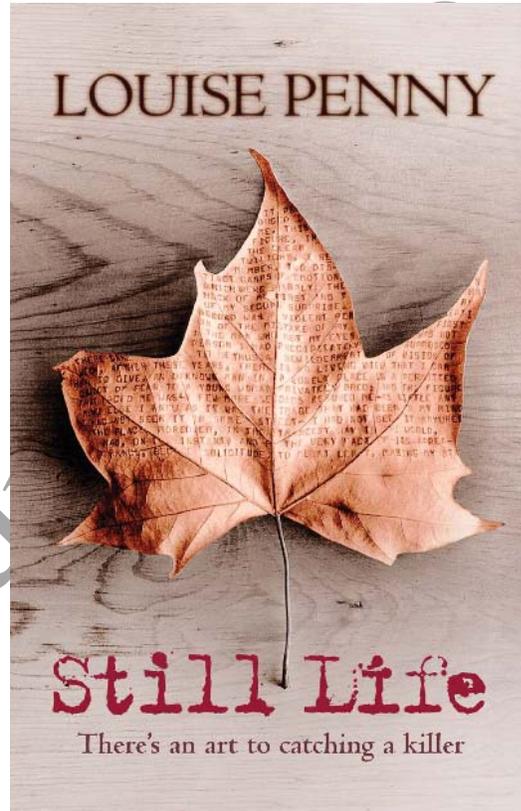
Louise Penny will be a familiar name to many readers, as for many years she hosted a news and public affairs program on CBC radio. Born in Toronto, she and her husband Michael Whitehead, and their two golden retrievers, now make their home near Sutton, Quebec. When she’s not writing, gardening, or volunteering in the local library, she and Michael enjoy travelling – especially to London and Paris. It’s a tough life.

Like many authors, Louise came to writing after a fully and varied career. I asked her what prompted her to make the leap. She said “Since I was a child lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling, playing with my imaginary friends, I’ve wanted to write. Now every day I get to go to my study and play with my imaginary friends, and get paid to do it. Mother was wrong, though only this once.”

### *Still Life* (Headline, 2005)

The village of Three Pines, located about twenty minutes east of Montreal, is a venerable slice of Quebec history. Founded by United Empire Loyalists over two hundred years ago, except for

electricity and indoor plumbing, it has remained largely unchanged. True, the mill and blacksmith’s forge have been



replaced by B & B’s and bookshops, bistros and boulangeries; but everyone knows everyone else, people don’t lock their doors when they go out, and there is no local police force. Crime is virtually unknown, and limited to petty acts of vandalism. But there is a snake in this Eden: Jane Neal, a local retired schoolteacher, loved by all (well, almost all) is found dead in the woods, dispatched by an arrow through her heart. Who could have wanted her dead, and why use such a bizarre weapon?

Enter Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, of the Sûreté du Québec's Homicide Squad. At first Gamache is out of his element, more familiar with the leafy surroundings of Outremont than with the rural (and largely Anglo) setting in l'Estrie. But he is a keen and impartial observer of people. Assisted by Inspector Jean Guy Beauvoir, and hampered by a less-than-helpful neophyte, agent Yvette Nichol, Gamache must untangle the twisted skein of village life. Jane Neal had recently submitted a painting for a local competition: it provoked both outrage and humour, not least for its absolute lack of technique. But the painting is a document as well, and it holds a vital clue to Jane's death. Among the suspects are a childhood friend of Jane who thwarted an early love affair, Jane's greedy niece, a troubled youth, and an unrepentant hunter who believes that the woods belong to everyone. Gamache meets a cast of characters familiar to anyone who has spent any time in the Townships, and has experienced both rural and Anglo village life. Like his literary predecessor, Simenon's Inspector Maigret, Gamache moves quietly and deliberately amongst people's lives, sorting out the detritus, and laying bare their secrets. As a fierce storm descends upon the normally tranquil village, events build to an exciting climax, as a villager also solves the mystery, putting her own life in peril.

### ***Recommendation***

First novels are notoriously risky business. Typically new authors strug-

gle to find their 'voice' – a distinctive style that makes them interesting and unique. Moreover, there are the inevitable teething problems of structure and pace that demand extensive rewrites. Small wonder, then, that so few new authors emerge each year.

*Still Life* is an exception to those norms. A runner-up for the Debut Dagger Award in 2004 (for Best First Novel), when *Still Life* was offered to publishers, Headline (a major player in mystery fiction) made a pre-emptive offer for the book, part of a three-book deal. The foreign rights were subsequently sold by auction (almost unheard of for a first author) to St. Martin's Press in the US, Oldmann (in Germany), and Unieboek (in Holland). It is also scheduled for release in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa -- all this while Louise is quietly at work on her second novel.

Louise Penny has her finger firmly on the pulse of village life in the Townships. The novel resonates both among people who know the Townships, and those who are new to village life. If that were all there was to *Still Life*, it would still be a revealing portrait of a place and a people. But it isn't all, (if you'll forgive the pun) by a long shot: *Still Life* is an original and well-told story, with a puzzle at its center, and enough clues and red herrings to satisfy the most inveterate mystery buff. I recommend it highly, and along with, I suspect, many others, I look forward to the next in the series.

Jim Napier can be reached at  
[jim.napier52@gmail.com](mailto:jim.napier52@gmail.com)