

Three Pines, many secrets

Gamache is back

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

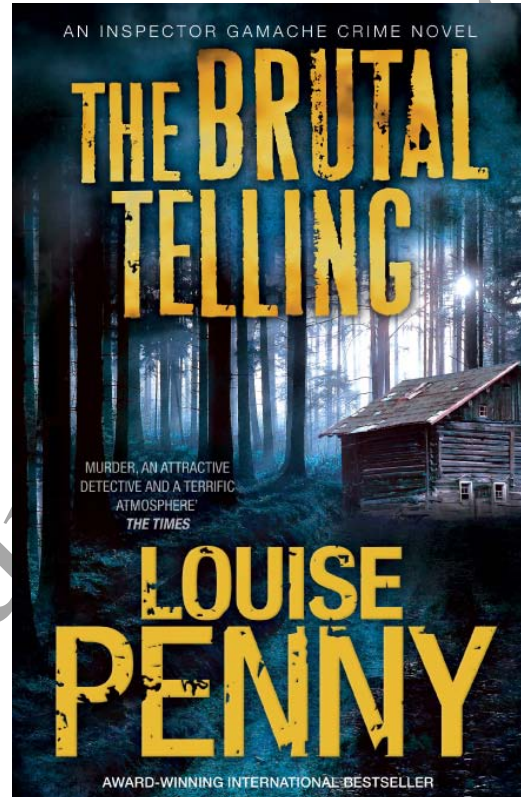
Following last year's adventure at the Manoir Bellechasse, Armand Gamache returns to the picturesque village of Three Pines. He has spent many enjoyable days there, and counts most of the residents among his friends.

Most, but not all. For someone has killed a stranger in their midst, and it falls to Gamache and his team to identify the victim and bring the killer to justice. Before it is over, the placid calm of Three Pines will be shattered, and Gamache will be forced to arrest an old friend.

Louise Penny

By now there can be few Townshippers over the age of five who are unaware of bestselling, award-winning author Louise Penny. Louise has penned four earlier novels documenting the dark goings-on in the deceptively tranquil village of Three Pines, among them her debut novel *Still Life*, which garnered her the Arthur Ellis, Anthony and Barry Awards for Best First Novel and propelled her onto the New York Times Bestseller list.

Louise followed that success with *Dead Cold*, which won her an Agatha Award for Best Novel of 2007) and *The Cruellest Month*, which was nominated for the Anthony, Macavity and Barry Awards, and won her an Agatha Award for Best Novel of 2008.



But there is, after all, only so much mayhem that one small village can be expected to endure, so Louise took Gamache out of the village for last year's *The Murder Stone*. Loosely set at a sumptuous inn near the village of North Hatley, it turned out to be a busman's holiday for the Chief Inspector and his wife, Reine-Marie, who went there hoping to quietly celebrate their anniversary; by the time they left, one person would be murdered and it would fall to Gamache to prevent a second person from meeting a similar fate.

Louise is a born storyteller, and each tale has revealed more about the quirky denizens of Three Pines, and each as well has given us new insights into the character of Gamache himself. Villages are famous for being places where nothing is private, and gossip soon exposes the darkest of secrets. But nothing will prepare the reader for the revelations in this tale; it is, indeed, a Brutal Telling.

A Brutal Telling
(Headline, 2009)

It's Labour Day weekend in Three Pines. Olivier Brulé and Gabri are having a bit of a lie-in, savouring the warmth of their duvet, understandably reluctant to shed the covers and face a dreary, rain-swept day. Understandably perplexed, also, at who would call them at six forty-three on a Sunday morning.

Their tranquility is short-lived. Throwing on their raincoats, they hurry across the village green from the B & B to Olivier's bistro, where local resident Myrna Landers has informed them she's called the police.

Through the window, clearly visible, there is a body on the floor.

In the leafy confines of Outremont, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache is enjoying his weekend as well. Most of the family, along with his friend and second in command, Jean Guy Beauvoir, has gathered under his roof, to share food and conversation and mostly good-natured bantering. When the phone rings, it is Beauvoir who takes the call, and then breaks the unwelcome news to his superior: a body has been discovered, apparently the victim of violence.

Yet another trip to Three Pines.

Arriving on the scene, Gamache assesses the task before him: in this tiny community where everyone knows

everyone else, and visitors don't remain strangers long, no one claims to know the victim, a middle-aged man in apparent good health, except for a bloody skull that has been crushed. Moreover, the bistro had been securely locked, with no sign of forced entry; so how did someone enter the premises, and why was he killed there?

It doesn't take the Chief Inspector long to learn that the victim is not the only new arrival in town. Marc and Dominique Gilbert have bought the old Hadley House, scene of the eventful climax detailed in Penny's first novel, *Still Life*. Their aim is to convert it to an upscale inn and spa. As well, a family of Czech immigrants, Hanna and Roar Parra, and their grown son Havoc, has landed in Three Pines, their latest stop since fleeing the repressive political regime in their homeland during the mid-nineteen-eighties. Beauvoir is convinced that, with a name like Havoc, the family needs looking into. And then there's the mysterious cabin in the woods: a most unlikely cabin, containing objects seen nowhere else in Three Pines.

Before Gamache leaves the village, Three Pines will have been rocked to its foundations, and the secrets of one of its most treasured residents will have been exposed for all to see.

***A skillful blend of atmosphere,
character, and plot***

This latest installment in the ongoing saga of Three Pines will please Penny's fans, many of whom have formed a real attachment for the not-quite-idyllic community. Odd when you think of it, since by now Three Pines must be the murder capital of Canada.

Penny's portrayal of village life is a delightful, if unsettling, cross between Grandma Moses and Hieronymus Bosch:

everything that should make one feel familiar and safe is there, but accompanied by an ominous foreboding, the unshakeable sense that something is not quite right. Her adept use of atmosphere and imagery is suggestive of a Hitchcock film, and she exploits it skillfully. As always, the characters are well-drawn and the dialogue is entirely believable, a convincing mix of blunt candour (Ruth Zardo), and evasiveness when called for. The author can be forgiven if certain details of the plot seem a trifle overdone; overall *The Brutal Telling* is a well-structured tale with a major revelation, and will appeal to Penny's many readers.

But be warned: Gamache's next case will take him beyond the familiar setting of Three Pines, to the dark and devious confines of Quebec City...

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