

Penny scores hat trick

Third novel her best by far

Suspended Sentences

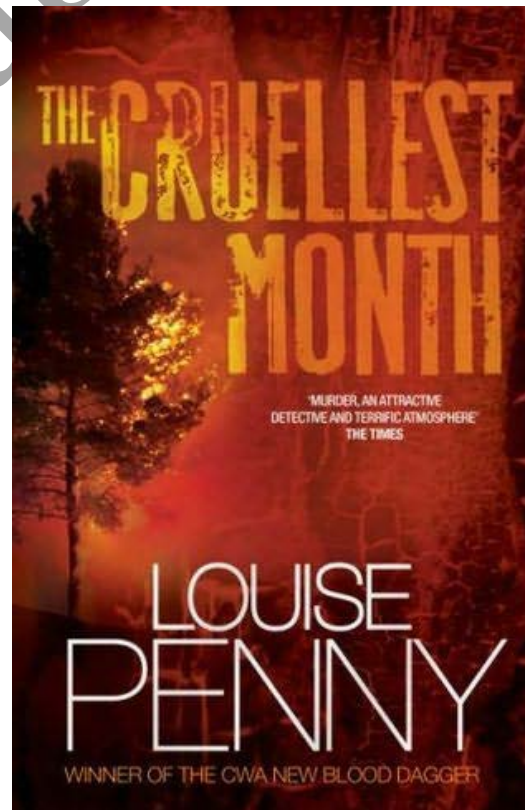
by Jim Napier

One of the many pleasures of reviewing books is that of sharing with readers the appearance of a new writer on the mystery scene. It is all the more agreeable when the writer is a local figure, well known to the community. I had that pleasure two years ago, when I reviewed Louise Penny's debut novel, *Still Life*. This week's pick—the third in her series—is especially rewarding as it too is set in the Eastern Townships, and draws an entertaining portrait of people and places with whom we are all familiar. Being a murder tale, however, we have to hope that some of the characters are not *too* familiar....

Louise Penny

Is there a regular reader of mystery fiction in the Eastern Townships who has not heard of Louise Penny, our very own Jessica Fletcher? For many years Louise attracted a loyal band of listeners as host of a news and public affairs program on CBC radio. After taking some time off she turned her hand to writing and submitted her first manuscript to a major British competition known as the Debut Daggers. To her surprise she was shortlisted for the award. That attracted some welcome attention among world-class agents and editors, and what became Penny's debut novel, *Still Life*, went on to be chosen by the Crime Writers of Canada as Best First Novel of 2006. She subsequently garnered the 2006 New Blood Dagger

for crime fiction awarded by the British-based Crime Writer's Association. She's had glowing reviews in the *New York Times Review of Books*, and the *Toronto Globe and Mail*—not without cause—has compared Penny's novels to those of Agatha Christie, whose enduring Miss Marple series set the literary standard for juxtaposing acts of murder against the tranquil setting of village life. A hard act to follow, to be sure, but follow it she did with the publication of *Dead Cold* in 2006. Somehow, between all of her readings,



signings, tours and public appearances, Louise Penny has found the time to complete her third Inspector Gamache novel, and fans of the traditional mystery story will not be disappointed.

Louise and her husband Michael live in Sutton Quebec, where the Quebec Writer's Federation is scheduled to host the worldwide launch of her book on October 23rd.

The Cruellest Month
(Headline Publishing, 2007)

They're back. The quirky, lovable, and sometimes outrageous residents of the not-so-tranquil village of Three Pines, Quebec. Readers will recall the elderly and eccentric poet Ruth Zardo, rude, obnoxious, and bitchy as ever. Then there's Gabri and Olivier, partners and co-owners of the local bistro and B&B. Clara Morrow and her husband Peter are there, still seeking affirmation of their artistic worth. We meet some new villagers as well: Monsieur Béliveau, the village grocer and an elderly widower; Hazel Smith and her daughter Sophie, the latter back from Queen's University, and Madeleine Favreau, a vivacious and captivating newcomer to the village. Not least, there is Jeanne Chauvet, a psychic from Montreal who has recently booked into the B&B at Three Pines.

Armand Gamache has returned as well. As head of the Homicide Division of the Quebec Sureté, he's assigned to investigate a sudden death in the bucolic village. The incident occurred at a séance, the victim dead from an apparent heart attack. It is some time before the reader discovers the identity of the victim, and longer still before the true cause of death is discovered, and motives are unearthed. Even then, there is a surfeit of suspects.

Gamache has brought his team with him, of course, and among them is at least one traitor, driven by ambition and out to destroy him. Hinted at in her first novel, *Still Life*, and elaborated upon in her second, *Dead Cold*, the central challenge facing Armand Gamache concerns old ghosts in the Sureté, an act that he committed years ago, and the suspicion and decay that act has spread even among members of his own team. Before it is over Gamache's personal life will be laid bare, and his reputation as an upright officer of the law is called into question, as he struggles to identify his enemies and deal with them. Can he prevail, and almost as importantly, at what cost?

A captivating tale

With the publication of *The Cruellest Month*, Louise Penny has come of age as a novelist. Already gaining confidence as a writer in her second novel, *Dead Cold*, in her latest effort Penny has fully matured. Gamache acquires new depth, and the plot has some nice surprises in store. The writing is sensual, full of sights and smells and tastes that will resonate with her readers. And although Penny paints an almost Grandma Moses idealized view of village life, it is a view tinged with ominous foreboding, reminiscent of the brooding images of Breughel and Bosch.

As the story comes to its climax, Gamache assembles the suspects at the crime scene and explains why each of them might have done the deed, before finally revealing the actual perpetrator. It is a plot device made famous by her illustrious predecessor, Agatha Christie; perhaps grown a bit hoary with time, but so fitting with Gamache's Old World manners that we forgive the cliché. *The Cruellest Month* is a captivating tale

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about jealousy on several levels, and its consequences: betrayal and revenge. All stand out in sharp relief against daily life in small Quebec village. It is a gem.

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