

And then there were six

Penny's latest whodunit set in North Hatley

Suspended Sentences

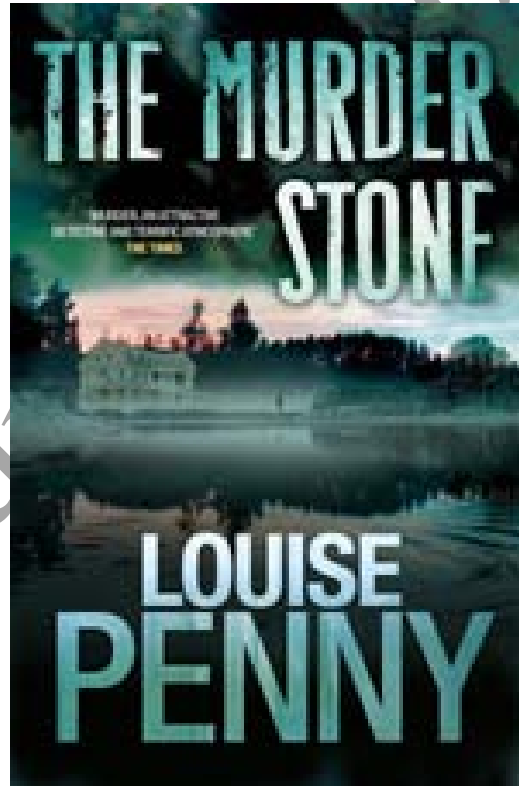
by Jim Napier

Louise Penny needs no introduction to most Townships readers, and her name is becoming increasingly known around the world. Her debut novel, *Still Life*, was published in 2005 after being shortlisted for the British-based Crime Writer's Association Debut Dagger. That, it turned out, was only the beginning. *Still Life* was awarded the British John Creasey Award for Best First Crime Novel, as well as the New Blood Dagger for crime fiction. It went on to win the Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Award for Best First Novel in 2006.

Penny followed her debut with *Dead Cold*, which, under the US title of *A Fatal Grace* earned her an Agatha Award for Best Novel of 2007. That same year she released *The Cruellest Month*, the third in her series of traditional puzzle mysteries set in the Eastern Townships village of Three Pines. True to form, it was shortlisted for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel of 2008.

Lest Three Pines (read Knowlton) become known as the Murder Capital of Canada, Penny has ventured further afield with her latest effort—but not so far that her setting will be unrecognizable to local readers. *The Murder Stone* is set in the immediate environs of North Hatley, Quebec, specifically, at a sumptuous inn known as the Manoir

Bellechasse. Townshippers will recognize it as the venerable Hovey Manor.



The Murder Stone
(Headline, 2008)

Armand Gamache and his wife Reine-Marie have descended on the upscale Manoir Bellechasse to celebrate their anniversary. For the devoted pair it marks a cherished private moment, a chance to annually mark their love for one another in a setting which holds very special memories.

The Gamaches have chosen the site for their celebration carefully. The Manoir

is an imposing structure, a great lodge hewn from the timbers of the surrounding forest a century earlier. Dominating Lake Massawippi, its presence speaks of power and influence, from the early robber barons who financed its construction to the wealthy guests that roam its halls today.

But the Gamaches' carefully-laid plans are doomed to failure, for that weekend also marks the reunion at the Manoir of a fated family. The Finneys are a dysfunctional lot, encompassing a mean-spirited, cynical matriarch who wants to honour the memory of her first husband, her repellent ex-con second husband, and an assortment of children and grandchildren who make the Addams family seem normal by comparison. And as proof that Gamache cannot run from his sins, it turns out that the disagreeable Finneys have unexpected family ties in the nearby village of Three Pines.

As each family member appears, old grievances, recriminations and jealousies surface and meld with new fears and accusations, and tragedy cannot be far off. Before the week is over one of the Finneys will die, and the life of another will hang in the balance.

Following the structure of Penny's earlier novels, the reader is treated to yet another dimension of Gamache's personal history, as he wrestles with the dark legacy of a father he barely knew. And summoned to the murder scene, Inspector Beauvoir continues to be utterly baffled by the curious ways of *Les Anglos* and what for him are the dubious attractions of the countryside, even while being smitten by the Manoir's formidable chef.

A classic puzzle mystery

The Murder Stone is a traditional puzzle mystery of which Agatha Christie herself would have been proud: an apparently impossible crime occurs in an isolated setting; the suspects all know one another, and each have seemingly airtight alibis; there are devilish clues combined with crafty red herrings; and the ending contains a clever twist, while making the solution maddeningly obvious.

Once again Penny has drawn on her trademark distinctive style, combining vivid imagery, drama, wit, and crisp dialogue:

Finney looked at him closely. 'You asked what I count each evening an each morning. What I counted each day in prison while better men withered and died. Do you know the sums that I do?' Gamache stood still, in case moving would scare this man off and he'd never have his answer. But he knew he needn't worry. This man was afraid of nothing. 'I count my blessings.'

He turned his head and saw Irene on the terrasse, as though he'd sense her there.

'We're all blessed and we're all blighted, Chief Inspector,' said Finney. 'Every day each of us does our sums. The question is, what do we count?'

Penny's latest effort embodies the leisurely, almost lyrical approach characteristic of her earlier novels, but with a difference: in places *The Murder Stone* is almost gothic in its mood, fear and foreboding taking centre stage:

When they'd gone as far as the known world took them, when he and Lacoste and all the other investigators could see no further, Chief Inspector Gamache stepped forward. He walked into the unknown. Because that's where murderers lurked. They might appear to walk in the same sun and drizzle, along the same grass and concrete, and even to speak the same language. But they didn't really. Chief Inspector Gamache was willing to go where few others could. And he never, ever asked them to follow him, only to help him find the way.

A tale of corruption, betrayal, and revenge, Penny's latest foray into the world of crime fiction is a fine addition to the Gamache series. Drawn from recent headlines, her theme is almost prescient, and lays bare the temper of our times. *The Murder Stone* marks Penny's growing mastery of the genre, and her willingness to take her stories to another level. Her growing legions of fans will not be disappointed.

Jim Napier can be reached at jim.napier52@gmail.com



© Jim Napier 2008