

Stranger Than Fiction

Louise Penny's latest novel rooted in fact

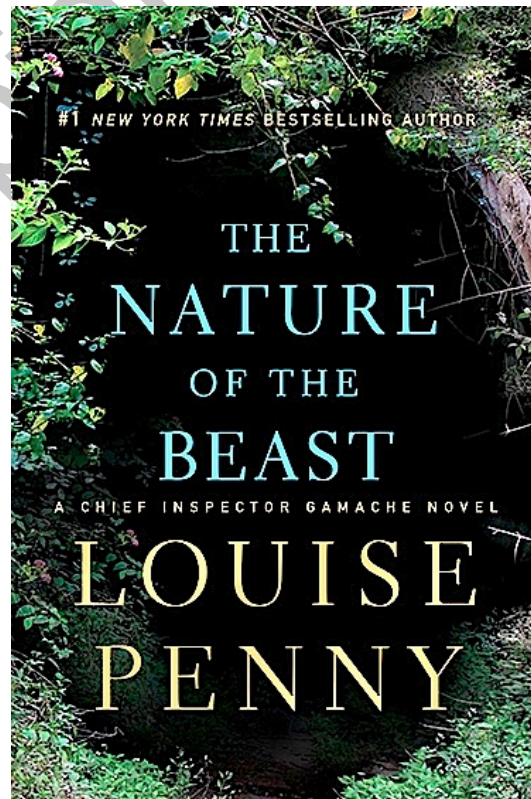
Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

It's autumn in Three Pines, and one of the village's more recent residents is slowly coming to terms with his Golden Years. Now that he has retired from the Sûreté du Québec, Armand Gamache and his wife Reine-Marie have moved to the idyllic village in the hope of transitioning to a quiet life. Gamache has tired of ridding the Sûreté of its rampant corruption, and although he has been successful, both he and Reine-Marie are looking forward to a more relaxed existence, a life defined by family and friends. Approached by a former colleague with the offer of a promotion to Superintendent, and the prospect of heading up the division that oversees homicide and serious crimes, Gamache can only say he'll give it some thought.

But trouble has a way of finding Gamache. Before long he is confronted by a young boy from the village, Laurent Lepage. Possessed of a vivid imagination, Laurent is well-known for inventing fantastic tales. If it isn't aliens, then it is zombies that are threatening the village and indeed life on earth; his lively fantasies are attributed to Al and Evie, his artistic, hippie parents, semi-reclusive and living outside the village.

One day Laurent stumbles from the woods and enters the bistro, disheveled, to tell Gamache and anyone who will listen that he's made an amazing discovery: a giant gun, hidden deep in the forest. In the boy's words, a really, really big one. And it has a monster on it.



But Gamache is preoccupied. He's just learned that a local amateur dramatic group, the Estrie Players, is planning to perform a play written by

someone whose mere name sends shivers down Gamache's spine. Decades ago John Fleming had been convicted of a series of brutal serial killings and sent to a maximum security prison. His very name conjured up an image of depravity, and Gamache cannot believe that anyone would rekindle his notoriety by performing the man's play. When the author's name becomes known, the villagers find themselves on opposite sides of the controversy. Even Gamache is uncharacteristically harsh in his judgment: the play should never see the light of day just as its author should never again see the light of day. He sees the play as simply part of an effort by John Fleming to escape his bondage and re-enter the world of ordinary people to work his terror once again.

Gamache's attention focuses on the dispute over Fleming's play until Laurent's parents call. He hasn't come home for dinner – an omission very unlike a growing nine-year-old boy. A search soon reveals his body in the woods, next to his bicycle. It seems he hit a rut and was thrown, striking his head on a rock. A likely enough explanation, but Gamache isn't convinced. Something simply doesn't ring true. Was the boy's

death somehow connected to the fanciful story he'd told everyone in the village the previous day? Slowly Gamache realizes that Laurent's death, the convicted murderer John Fleming, and the story of a giant gun emblazoned with a monster may all be related, and that solving these puzzles may require dealing with the devil.

Interweaving disparate events that actually occurred in Canada only a few decades ago, Louise Penny has devised an ingenious and compelling plot that has just enough reality in it to ring true, a fact she reminds her readers of in a brief afterword. All the familiar denizens of Three Pines are there, of course: Gabri and Olivier, Ruth Zardo, Myrna, and Reine-Marie, along with the familiar faces of Gamache's former colleagues, Isabelle Lacoste (now Chief Inspector), and his son-in-law, Jean-Guy Beauvoir. Penny adds new faces to the mix, challenging her readers to winnow out the culprit(s) in this deftly layered tale that is part classic traditional whodunit and part *Silence of the Lambs*.

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