

No Stopping This Lady

Penny's latest confirms growing mastery

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

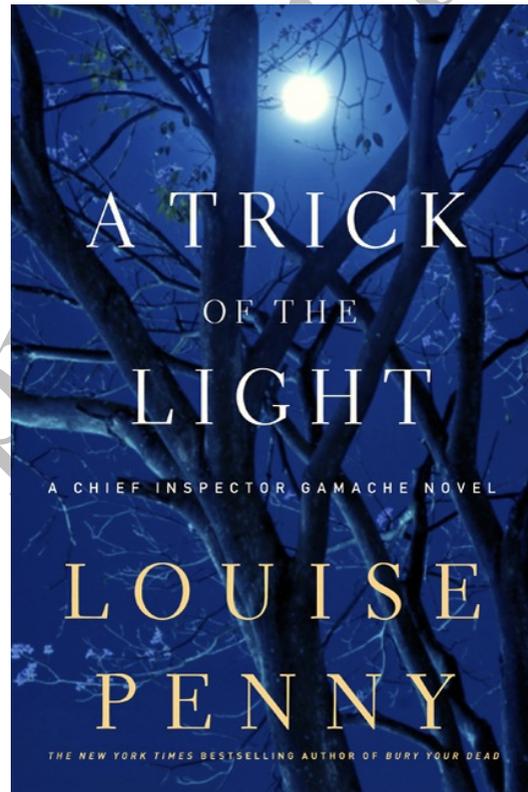
Louise Penny is well known to readers of crime fiction worldwide. Her six previous novels have sold well over a million copies, and along the way Penny has garnered more prizes than any author—in or out of crime fiction—in recent memory. Among her achievements are the CWA's New Blood Dagger for Best First Novel, the Arthur Ellis, Barry, Anthony and Dilys awards, and an unprecedented *four* Agatha Awards for Best Crime Novel of the Year.

Going from strength to strength, Penny has served up yet another winner in the latest of her bestselling tales chronicling the exploits of Chief Inspector Armand Gamache. Part puzzle mystery, part psychological thriller, it showcases her growing mastery of a genre she has dominated for the past several years.

Louise Penny
A Trick of the Light
(Minotaur Books, 2011)

Artist Clara Morrow has finally hit her stride. After having a one-person show at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montreal to rave reviews she returns to the tiny village of Three Pines to host a vernissage at her home, attended by her many friends in the village, along with some of the biggest names in the art world. She is quietly pleased with the recognition being given her work; her husband Peter, whose own artistic efforts

are less well regarded, quietly resents her success.



Despite her own apprehensions at the attention being paid her, the event is everything Clara could have wished – until the next morning, that is, when a body turns up in her flower garden. To make matters worse, the victim is Lillian Dyson, an art critic who had viciously condemned Clara's paintings years earlier, in print.

Chief Inspector Gamache and his team hurry to the tiny village, where it is clear that they are dealing with a case of

murder. It is a difficult time for them, too. Local innkeeper Olivier Brulé has been released from prison, but hasn't forgiven Gamache for arresting him for a murder he didn't commit. And Gamache's second in command, Inspector Jean Guy Beauvoir is fighting his own demons. Addicted to pain killers following the factory shooting that left him gravely injured, he struggles through flashbacks to determine whether Gamache had abandoned him under fire. His personal life is spiraling downward as well. In the midst of a divorce, Beauvoir finds himself increasingly obsessed with Gamache's daughter Annie, who's undergoing marital problems of her own. Enough fuel for several fires, then, and all of it smouldering.

As Gamache works his way through the challenging case he is forced to enter a complex world where he meets art dealers and gallery owners, emerging artists and others on the fringe of the art world. In this rarified atmosphere the lines between envy, jealousy, and bitterness are very thin, and once crossed, going back is not an option. Amidst all this turmoil Gamache must find time to confront both the festering hatred of a man he wrongly sent to prison and the lingering suspicions of Beauvoir, who fears Gamache may have betrayed him when his life was on the line.

Entertaining, probing, insightful

Returning to Three Pines is like having a family reunion. We are, by now, accustomed to the diffident Clara Morrow and her long-suffering husband Peter; to villagers Myrna Landers and Olivier Brulé; and not least, to the irascible yet somehow endearing curmudgeon, Ruth Zardo. We watch

Gamache as he steers an unfailing path, guided by his own moral compass and his rigorous intellect, assuming nothing, open to all possibilities. And we observe with, it must be said, a certain pleasure, as Inspector Jean Guy Beauvoir continues his steady evolution from a one-dimensional professional sleuth who understands little of Anglo culture to a more rounded and fallible human being, with fears and longings that we can all relate to.

A traditional puzzle tale, *A Trick of the Light* is like a set of Russian nesting dolls, with clues and red herrings and unexpected plot twists to satisfy even the most demanding of readers; but breathe easily: Penny has not forgotten her trademark mouth-watering culinary passages that send readers in search of her iconic village. Drawing on the backstory of a police raid gone wrong (first revealed in her previous novel, *Bury Your Dead*) allows Penny to further layer her characters, giving them more depth and texture than in earlier works. As a result, beyond the strictly entertaining aspect of a tale well told, *A Trick of the Light* is also a probing exploration of the corrosive effects of envy, as well as an insightful look at contrition, forgiveness, and taking responsibility for one's actions. There is, then, something here for everyone: take from it what you want, enjoy it fully, and prepare for the next installment of what bodes well to become a contemporary Canadian saga.

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