

Quo Vadis, Armand?

Gamache finds life after retirement

Suspended Sentences

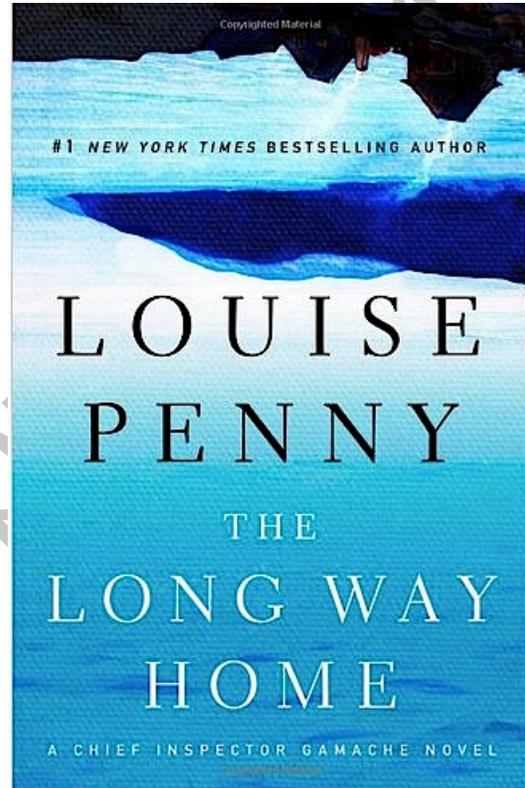
by Jim Napier

Nearly a year ago readers of Louise Penny's *How the Light Gets In* were treated to a riveting climax to the intriguing saga of Armand Gamache, as the Chief Inspector moved to deal decisively with his nemesis in the Sûreté. But they might have been forgiven for wondering what lay in store for Gamache as he ends his career.

They needn't have worried. In *The Long Way Home* Penny demonstrates what many people already know: life doesn't end upon retirement. We can only hope that most of us will lead more tranquil lives.

As the story opens Armand Gamache has moved to Three Pines. He begins each morning sitting on a nearby hilltop, surveying the village and reading a book, and is looking forward to spending tranquil days with Reine-Marie, when Clara Morrow joins him. At first she merely sits quietly on the bench alongside Gamache, saying nothing. But eventually she confides in her friend: her husband Peter has gone missing.

The two had separated twelve months ago, following Clara's extraordinary success in the art world and Peter's difficulty, as an artist, accepting it in the wake of his own stalled career. But they had agreed to come together



in a year's time to assess their relationship. Clara had forced the issue by asking Peter to leave, but he hasn't reappeared, or even contacted her, and now she is shouldering a burden both of concern and guilt. At first she tells Gamache simply in order to share her anxiety, but before long Clara accepts his offer to help locate her husband, and they set out to find the troubled man. Thus begins an odyssey that is also, for all concerned, a voyage of self-discovery.

Jean-Guy Beauvoir is still recovering from physical injuries, addiction to pain killers and psychological issues; but asked by Gamache for help he rallies his energies and traces Morrow first to Montreal, then to Paris, and on to Florence and Venice: is the troubled painter making a pilgrimage to the epicentres of world-renowned artists in a desperate effort to rekindle his own flickering creative flame? Just as they think they might have a hold on his thinking Beauvoir tracks him to Dumfries, a small town in the southwest of Scotland which has seemingly little in common with his previous stops; and when the trail leads back to Toronto then Quebec City, they lose all further traces of the man.

Out of leads, they contact Peter's family in Toronto, knowing they are at best a dysfunctional lot and unlikely to help. His sister Marianna is surprised – not to say pleased – when she learns her brother has disappeared. The sole and slender thread she offers is that while in the city Peter had visited his former art college – the same one Clara attended, and where they'd first met. But from Marianna's androgynous child, Bean, they learn that Peter had sent them several paintings, so conspicuously lacking in talent that at first they'd thought the child had painted them.

Clara visits the art college and reconnects with an elderly professor from her days there, Professor Paul Massey. But this lead, too, proves fruitless: it seems that during his visit Peter had only discussed old times.

Gradually Clara comes to believe that the paintings Peter gave to Bean were more significant than she'd appreciated: they were markers of Peter's journey in his quest for self.

And so the saga continues. Supported by her friends Ruth Zardo and Myrna Landers, Jean-Guy and Armand, Clara undertakes to trace her husband and learn why he hadn't returned to her – if only to say that he wouldn't be returning. The journey takes the group into the depths of Quebec's hinterlands, up the St. Lawrence to communities so tiny and remote that they cannot be reached except by plane or boat, and into a land so desolate that legend says God gave it to Cain. And what the group discovers there is rooted in a hatred so intense that violent actions set in motion decades earlier have yet to fully play themselves out. Before the tale has ended, the hunters will become the hunted, and the village of Three Pines will lose one of its residents forever.

I have said for some time that with each book Louise Penny just seems to get better and better. Her grasp of structure and style is constantly being refined, and yet remains accessible to her readers and indispensable to her storytelling. The characters are familiar, and we have come to expect flashes of Ruth Zardo's often vicious humour and Gamache's own, more subtle exchanges, as well as Myra's psychological insights and Jean-Guy's exasperation at not being able always to do things his way; and these are all present, as familiar landmarks in this latest tale. But there is also a growing

ease with language, and an increasingly profound use of metaphor, apparent in this book, which will appeal to readers in search of a fine tale exquisitely told. The roots of this story can be traced all the way back to Penny's debut novel, *Still Life*, and we can readily perceive how events and relationships in that early tale set in motion the tensions, and ultimately provide the climax, of Penny's latest work.

In her acknowledgements Louise Penny mentions her debt to both Homer's *Odyssey* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and justly so: for *The Long Way Home* is both literally and metaphorically about voyages, on one level a journey into Quebec's hinterlands in search of a loved one, and on another an effort at self-discovery every bit as important to the tale. It is a superbly crafted, and eloquently written, novel, and will resonate with her many readers.

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Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian newspapers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January magazine*, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine*, *the Montreal Review of Books*, and *Amazon.com*, as well as on his own award-winning site, <http://deadlydiversions.com/> He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com



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