

Sherrì on the rocks

Bartending is murder

Suspended Sentences

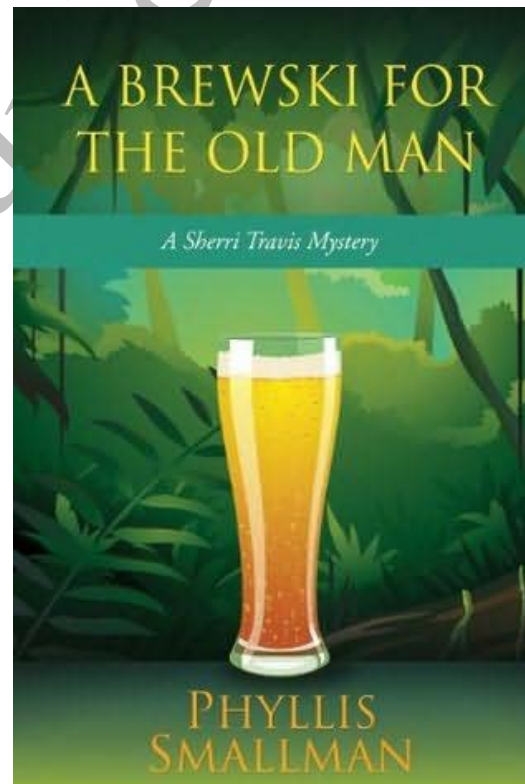
by Jim Napier

This week, a change of pace. Many crime writers focus on the admittedly rich urban landscape, finding much to mine in the tension-filled corridors of politics and the business world, the high-rise condos of white-collar criminals and the sordid back alleys ruled by street gangs of disaffected youths; they often neglect the smaller, less obvious vacation settings where people go to get away from it all. But don't be deceived by their tranquility: beneath the unhurried pace, dark glasses, and sunscreen of beach-front resort towns lurk genuinely evil people carrying secrets every bit as dark as those found in the mean streets of big cities, and it takes just one false step or one quirk of circumstance to unleash the beast and bring the violence out into the open. This week's pick is a cautionary tale, then, that speaks to us all, and in the process provides a compelling read with but one caveat: make your summer plans carefully, for you never know what life is going to throw at you...

Phyllis Smallman

When Phyllis Smallman first appeared on the literary scene two years ago it was as the winner of the very first Arthur Ellis Award for Best Unpublished Novel, established by Louise Penny and Michael Whitehead. Her debut novel *Margarita Nights* was subsequently picked up and published by Canada's own McArthur & Co. to great acclaim,

and Phyllis followed that up the very next year with *Sex in a Sidecar*, clear evidence that she was no one-trick pony. Not surprising to anyone who knows her, for although her career as a published author is still relatively young, Phyllis has been writing for years, honing her craft and always observing the colourful, and sometimes bizarre, Florida landscape.



An accomplished potter as well, when they are not at their home in Salt Spring Island, B.C., Phyllis and her husband Lee divide their time between southern

Florida and Hamilton, Ontario. Although many people would take the change of scenery simply as personal down time, one suspects that Phyllis Smallman is busy finding menace and murder lurking behind every unfamiliar sound and around every corner.

A Brewski for the Old Man
(McArthur & Co., 2010)

In the wake of a hurricane Sherri Travis has returned to her hometown of Jacaranda, Florida. With the help of her bank and her lover as a silent partner she has bought the Sunset Bar and Grill, moving up from bartender to proprietor. The watering hole and restaurant is located on prime beachfront real estate, and comes with a bookstore and clothing boutique located on the ground floor, and Sherri finds it is not all smooth sailing as she wrestles with high operating costs and light-fingered bar staff while hoping to hold things together until the tourist season goes into full gear.

Despite the pre-season slump things are just beginning to come together for Sherri when an old nemesis shows up. Ray John Leenders tried to rape Sherri when she was all of twelve. She fought him off and coped with the attack alone, afraid to tell her father, Tully Jenkins, an ex-Vietnam vet with a short fuse who likes to settle his own affairs.

Nearly twenty years later Leenders is back, the head of security at a nearby gated community. He is dating Rena Cagel, who runs the clothing store below Sherri's bar and grill. Even more ominously, he's taken to abusing Rena's sixteen-year-old daughter, Lacey.

Lacey refuses to tell her mother about Ray John's assaults, but accepts Sherri's offer to stay at her condo overnight.

Sherri digs out a small automatic pistol her father gave her years ago, and heads out to confront Ray John. She warns him to back off or she'll blow the whistle; but Ray John doesn't take advice kindly. When she leaves he pursues her in his SUV, trying to wreck her car. When Sherri drives into the local police parking lot he backs off and races away, but the message is clear: he's not going to take this lying down. A cop friend is unable to do much: Sherri never reported the incident, and after so many years the statute of limitations has passed. In an effort to warn Ray John off, he urges her to make a public complaint, but she refuses; she's afraid her current lover will leave her.

When Sherri's father, Tully Jenkins, reappears in her life she tells him about Ray John. He offers to take care of things, but Sherri knows all too well what he has in mind. Before the dust settles a good man will land in the hospital, someone will die, and Sherri will find herself the lead suspect in a murder case.

A captivating tale with a serious moral undertone

One of the freshest new voices to emerge in years, there's no question that Phyllis Smallman has staying power. *A Brewski for the Old Man* has all of the literary landmarks her readers have come to expect: a likeable protagonist, a loathsome villain and colourful secondary characters, and a fast-paced plot full of twists and turns, all set against the unique backdrop of the small-town Florida landscape and told in her inimitable style. But as a probing look at the victims of sexual abuse and the mental gymnastics they go through to avoid coming to terms with their abusive relationships, *A Brewski for the Old Man* goes well beyond Smallman's earlier

works: it is a captivating tale with a serious moral undertone, and marks her growing confidence and skill as a writer. Definitely not to be missed.

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