

All the write stuff

Canadian pens impressive debut

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

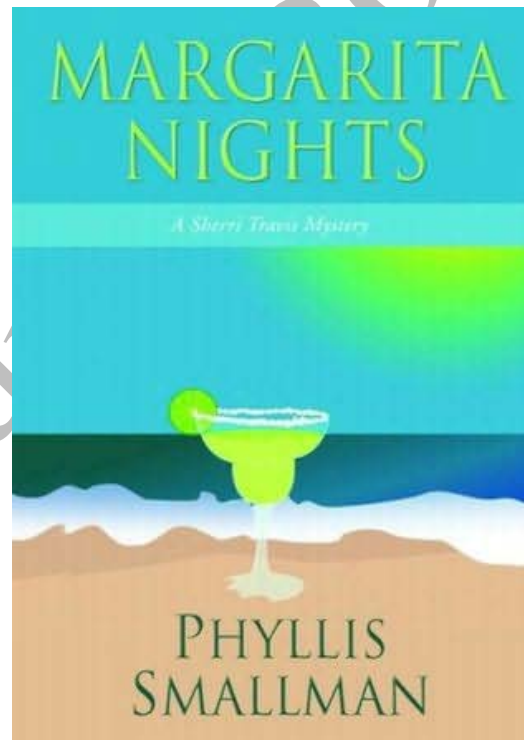
As I've said before in this column, one of the pleasures of book reviewing is the opportunity to introduce readers to a new and talented writer. In the course of a year there are dozens if not hundreds of debut crime novels, and most make a mercifully brief appearance. Small wonder that many first efforts sink into oblivion soon after publication: when you think what's required of a good novel—strong yet vulnerable characters, a convincing setting, a distinctive voice—it's so easy to go wrong in one way or another.

But thankfully, every so often someone gets it exactly right. Shortlisted for the British Debut Dagger Award for Best First Novel in 2004, Phyllis Smallman went on to garner the first Arthur Ellis Award for Best Unpublished Novel from the Crime Writers of Canada, a prize established by the Townships' own Louise Penny and her husband Michael Whitehead in 2007. Although she is new to the crime writing scene, Phyllis spins an entertaining tale with style and panache.

Phyllis Smallman

Born in Scotland (Ontario, that is), after attending McMaster University Phyllis Smallman worked in various libraries in Southern Ontario. She tried her hand at being a potter and realised that she could make more money by disposing of

bodies for the mob in her kiln; having found her true interests, Phyllis turned to crime writing.



A pet fancier—at one point while living on a farm they collected no less than 17 cats—Phyllis and her husband Lee now divide their time between Salt Spring Island, B.C. and Florida, where their only quasi-pet is a white egret named Elvis who comes to their door mooching hot dogs (don't tell PETA). Their two grown children having left the nest, Phyllis has returned to her other passions, community work and golf. I suspect one or the other will have to go

if she is to cope with her burgeoning writing career. My advice: keep the golf.

Margarita Nights
(McArthur & Co., 2008)

Cypress Island, Key West: the Sunset Bar and Grill is a fashionable watering hole complete with pink stucco exterior, white shutters, etched glass doors, cypress-paneled walls, and giant fans to cool its upmarket patrons. It is presided over by bartender Sherri Travis, a late twenty-something divorcée who finally walked on her husband Jimmy after nine long years of lying, drinking and affairs.

Now Jimmy is dead—the result of an explosion on his pleasure boat, the *Suncoaster*—and the police, in the form of a taciturn Detective named Styles, are looking at Sherri as the obvious cause of his premature demise. It's not that implausible given their stormy relationship and the fact that Jimmy wouldn't take "No" for an answer; but Sherri insists she had no reason for wanting him dead, and enlists the help of a couple of bar friends to prove Styles wrong.

The situation isn't helped by Jimmy's mother Bernice, who considers Sherri a tramp and blames him for all her son's troubles. Not a source of help, then, Sherri turns to Jimmy's friend, Andy Crown. Complicating matters, Andy is a paranoid schizophrenic who's gone off his meds, and lately has gone missing as well. (Conspiracy theory, anyone?) Sherri pokes into Jimmy's private life, learning that he'd been bedding a local doctor's wife, a fact that hadn't gone down particularly well with the good doctor. Then she discovers that the assistant golf pro at the country club where Jimmy was in charge seems to have been running a fiddle on the side. Add to that the fact that Jimmy had

recently tried to buy into a local development project with money he didn't have, and it's clear that he was punching well above his weight. There is a surfeit of suspects, then, and Sherri's quest for the truth will bring her no end of grief, not least a trailer fire in which someone wants to serve Sherri on the side, well done.

Getting it exactly right

A traditional or "cozy" novel, where the emphasis is on the puzzle rather than on gratuitous violence, *Margarita Nights* is a refreshingly strong debut novel—the strongest I've come across in years. Sherri Travis is a nice blend of sassy, in-your-face attitude combined with an underlying vulnerability that the author gets exactly right. The secondary characters are believable and well-drawn, the dialogue and narration are crisp and leavened with humour. The action is well-paced, and Smallman's description of the south Florida setting will resonate perfectly with readers who have spent time in the southern reaches of the Sunshine State.

I'm not alone in my opinion: within weeks of its publication *Margarita Nights* had already made it to the *New and Hot Table* at Chapters. In the Spring of 2009 it will be followed by *Sex in a Sidecar*, in which Sherri is trapped with a deranged woman and a murderer during a hurricane. Phyllis Smallman is already at work on the third novel in her series, *And a Brewski for the Old Man*, which will bring together alligator poaching, the death of a child abuser, and the true meaning of family. Keep your eye on this talented and original author; she's moving from making a kiln to making a killing...

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