

No one-book wonder

Canadian author pens worthy sequel

Suspended Sentences

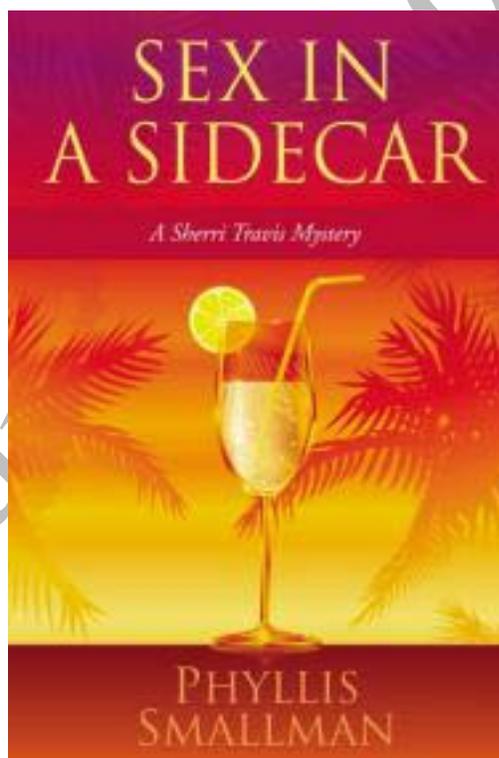
by Jim Napier

T*empus fugit.* A year ago Canadian author Phyllis Smallman was launching her debut novel, *Margarita Nights*. A year earlier she had won the very first Unhanged Arthur award, which is given annually by the Crimewriters of Canada for the Best Unpublished First Novel. Established by Louise Penny and her husband, Michael Whitehead, together with Canadian publisher McArthur and Company, the prize was created to help previously unpublished authors gain national recognition and perhaps see their winning entry appear in print. Sure enough, McArthur picked up her manuscript, loved it, and last year released it to widespread acclaim. Later *Margarita Nights* earned Phyllis a spot as a finalist in the British-Based Crime Writers Association Debut Dagger competition. She has followed it up with her second novel in the series, *Sex in A Sidecar*, and it's a worthy sequel to the earlier work.

Phyllis Smallman

After a succession of jobs in libraries and as a potter Phyllis Smallman finally bit the bullet and turned to her first love, crime writing. It brought her the proverbial "overnight" success, and since then she hasn't looked back. But she will be the first to tell you that *Margarita Nights* was not her first manuscript, simply the first to be pub-

lished. Fact is, Phyllis has been writing novels for years, patiently improving her



craft and filing away a wealth of plot ideas and colourful details that she can draw upon for future works. A good thing, as her works are attracting a growing legion of admiring fans.

Articulate and outgoing, when not touring and doing signings Phyllis and her husband Lee divide their time between BC's Salt Spring Island, Hamilton Ontario, and Southwest Florida, where she hatches her plots for her spunky sleuth, bartender Sherri Travis.

Sex in a Sidecar
(McArthur & Co., 2009)

Sherri Travis is having a bad week. First a hurricane strikes the town of Jacaranda, on a barrier island off the West coast of Florida, where Sherri tends bar at the Sunset Bar and Grill. When she finds herself locked out of her pickup in the chaos of evacuating the bar, Gina Ross, a woman patron she's only recently met, offers her a lift. But Sherri is alarmed to discover they're going in the wrong direction, away from the causeway that forms their escape route, rather than toward it. The woman seems obsessed, and when they come to a halt at a cottage the woman leaps from the car and disappears with the car keys. In desperation Sherri searches for her, and it is not long before Sherri discovers the woman's lifeless body. Her skull has been crushed, the object that did it isn't in sight, and she's been laid out in crucifixion fashion. No doubt about it: she's been murdered.

Retrieving the car keys Sherri makes her way to the mainland, where she reports the crime. Over the next few days she learns that Gina had a sister who was also recently murdered, and her death bears an eerie similarity to yet another death, a tourist named Bunny Lehre who had been killed while visiting the island. When it's revealed that Gina Ross knew Bunny Lehre as well it looks as though there might be a serial killer at work in Jacaranda.

It's not really Sherri's problem, of course; the Sunset Bar and Grill has been virtually destroyed by the hurricane, and Sherri needs to find another job. Contacting an old friend who runs the bar at the Jacaranda Bath and Tennis Club, she manages to get some temp work. It's not long before

Sherri realizes that all is not sweetness and roses at the upscale resort: someone is dealing drugs, and one of the pool boys is having an affair with one of the members, to his girlfriend's dismay. As well, there's a club member with a loose tongue, a fondness for Sherri's shooters, and a tendency not to know her limit. Add to that Sherri's total inability to leave matters to the police, and it all makes for a lethal brew that will see more deaths before things are sorted out.

Perfect recipe for a fascinating read

As I've said before in this column, writing debut novels are a tricky business: all too often one book is all an author has in them, and the sequel is a disappointment. Having reviewed *Margarita Nights* I had no such doubts about Phyllis Smallman. She is a gifted writer, and has created a strong and captivating protagonist in Sherri Travis. Sassy yet vulnerable, full of self-doubts about her relatively new relation with wealthy lover Clay Adams, Sherri is an engaging figure whose combination of single-minded determination, absolute can-do attitude, and underlying sense of values utterly beguiles the reader. Add to that the strong sense of place unique to the Florida Keys, together with the menace of a major storm reminiscent of the film classic *Key Largo*, and you have the perfect recipe for a fascinating read. I'm already looking forward to the next installment in the Sherri Travis saga.

And if you're wondering about the title, you'll just have to read the book.

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