

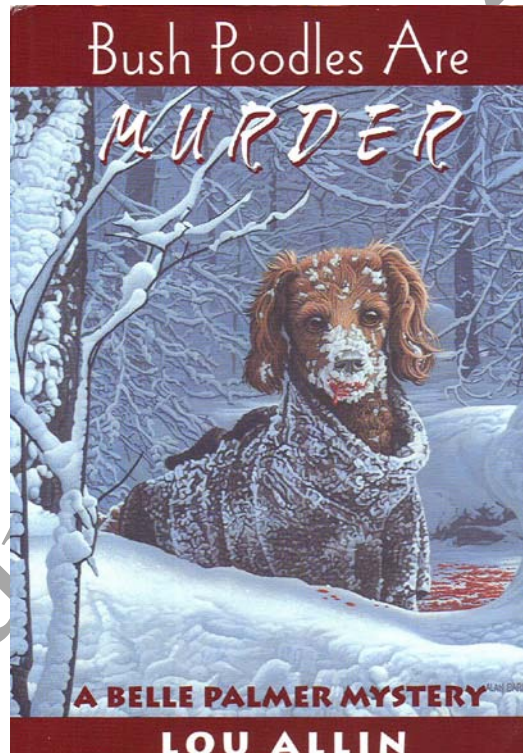
A Winter's Tale

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

As someone born and raised in California, I hate winter. I loath having to remove great mounds of frozen slush from my driveway, only to have a sadistic snowplow operator dump a fresh load in it — and on me — the moment I am finished. I resent having to dress up as if I'm going for a walk on the moon, simply to trudge fifty meters to retrieve my mail. I detest having frozen fingers, having to chip ice off my windshield, and having to keep my eye fixed firmly on the ground, lest I slip and break something impor-tant. Surely, after thousands of millennia, having penned evocative sonnets, composed exquisite music, and explored the very heavens that sur-round us, the human species is capable of something more significant than staring at its feet for four months of the year.

So, I hear you ask, if I hate winter so much why don't I simply return to sunnier climes? Simple. My family is here, my friends are here, and anyway, my birthplace has become infested by techno-nerds and dot-com capitalists, two-hour commutes and a body-building governor of dubious intellectual powers. Thomas Wolfe was right: you can't go home again.



All this is in aid of explaining why, for me, this week's mystery pick was an especially difficult choice. It's set in Northern Ontario, Sudbury to be exact; and — you guessed it — it takes place during the depths of winter. Not since *The Poseidon Adventure* has setting been so central to the telling of a tale.

Lou Allin

Lou Allin was born in Toronto, but raised in Cleveland, Ohio. With a Ph.D. dissertation on Christopher Marlowe, the murdered English Renaissance spy, she came early to a love of crime stories. Newly retired from teaching Criminal

Justice students at Cambrian College in Northern Ontario, she lives just outside Sudbury on the shore of a large crater lake, where she hikes, canoes snowmobiles and snowshoes. Lou shares her home with a German Shepherd called Nikon and a Mini-Poodle named Friday. She has written two other novels in the Belle Palmer Series, *Northern Winters are Murder* and *Blackflies are Murder*, the latter having been shortlisted by the Crime Writers of Canada for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel. Lou has also written a standalone mystery set in a university in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, titled *A Little Learning is a Murderous Thing*. Her latest novel, *Murder, Eh?* is scheduled for publication in the Spring of 2006.

***Bush Poodles are Murder*
(Rendezvous Press, 2004)**

Belle Palmer is an independent realtor struggling to eke out a living in Sudbury, Ontario with her friend and co-worker, Miriam MacDonald. When Miriam's lover, investment dealer Mel Elphinstone, is bludgeoned to death, she attempts suicide and is institutionalized, and Belle inherits her ailing pet poodle. With the pesky pet in tow, Belle sets out to prove her friend's innocence — not an easy matter when the police have a murder weapon (an Inuit sculpture) with Miriam's prints on it, and it's revealed that she visited Mel earlier on the day he was killed than she admitted to the police. While fending off the unwanted advances of a local cop, Belle learns that Mel had a shady past bilking gullible investors. Digging into his financial dealings, it's not long before someone is stalking Belle with a high-powered rifle. Events come to a climax during a fierce

snowstorm, and Belle is confronted by the elements and an armed psychopath.

A gripping tale

Given its harsh setting, and my regard for the English language, I cannot bring myself to call *Bush Poodles* a 'cozy'. It is a gripping tale of self-reliant individuals set against the harsh background of the Northern Ontario wilderness. There is suspense and there is violence, but not a lot of the latter, and it is tempered by an underlying humour. All in all, *Bush Poodles are Murder* is a very entertaining read.

So enjoy this week's pick, and if you want to get in touch with me, I shall be spending part of the holiday season in New Mexico, where the snow has the civility to remain in the distant mountains, the closest thing to a Christmas Tree is a Segura cactus, and the only thing roasting on an open fire is barbecued ribs with Jalapeño peppers.

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