

The Price of Crime

Chapman's latest explores guilt and judgment

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

When sexual offences become the focus of a crime novel, the perspective is nearly always that of the victim—or if not, the author focuses on the investigating officers. Seldom is a convicted sexual predator effectively portrayed in depth. In *Shallow End* Canadian crime writer Brenda Chapman attempts to give full dimensionality to a woman imprisoned for assaulting a young person in her care. It is an ambitious effort, and Chapman succeeds brilliantly.

Jane Thompson lives a solitary life in a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in Kingston, Ontario; or at least she aspires to do so. It would be easier to achieve if only members of the media weren't camped on her doorstep. Understandable, though, as she's recently been released from prison, where she has served a four-year sentence as a convicted child predator. When she is released from prison she wants only to visit her children, Olivia and Ben; but their father Adam has taken them out of town, accompanied by his much-younger girlfriend, Naomi.

Kala Stonechild is a Kingston police detective attached to the Homicide Division. She and her boss, Staff



Sergeant Jacques Rouleau, and several fellow officers are just finishing breakfast when Rouleau gets a call: a body has been found in the woods nearby. Before long it's identified as a seventeen-year-old youth named Devon Eton. His head has been bashed in, and his mother is certain she knows who did it: Jane Thompson, who had been one of Devon's teachers four years earlier, and who had subsequently gone to prison for sexually assaulting Devon.

The evidence produced at Jane Thompson's trial had been persuasive: text messages between Devon and Jane Thompson setting up meetings; naked photos of Devon on Jane's home computer; a witness who said they'd seen the two in "compromising positions" and testified that Devon had confided to him that he and his teacher had been having sex together; and DNA found on clothing in Devon's gym bag. Against such damning evidence the teacher's denials and the claim that she'd been set up were pathetically flimsy. She had been convicted, and a year into her sentence, she had confessed. In the end Jane Thompson had lost her family, her job, her reputation, and her freedom. Now it seems she is the sole suspect in Devon's death, and no one, certainly not the police, takes her claims of innocence seriously.

Leading the investigation into Devon's death, Staff Sergeant Rouleau is privately grieving. He has recently lost his wife, whom he very much loved, to cancer. And as Kala Stonechild pursues the case, she is forced to grapple with her own challenges. A native Canadian, she has faced all the tribulations common to people of her heritage. She had lived on the streets for a while, and after that fact had become public lost custody of her niece, Dawn, while the

girl's parents were in prison. She'd striven to keep her relationship professional with Paul Gundersund, one of the other officers on the team, while he and his wife work their way through marital problems. Sensing Paul's interest, Stonechild fights the desire to reach out to Paul and to make him hers. But Gundersund's jealous wife doesn't believe Stonechild's neutrality, and makes her suspicions and her bitterness evident. More than enough on Stonechild's plate, then. But not enough to keep her from getting to the bottom of things.

Shallow End is a textured, nuanced account of complex people caught up in the whirlwind of a major criminal investigation. It features a carefully paced, well structured plot with finely drawn characters, and ranks among the best of recent Canadian crime writing. There is little doubt that it will quickly attract new readers to this very talented author.

The first Stonechild and Rouleau novel, *Cold Mourning*, was nominated for the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Crime Novel of 2015, and was followed by *Butterfly Kills* and *Tumbled Graves*. *Shallow End* is the fourth in the series.

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