

Digging for the truth

Canadian novel a standout

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

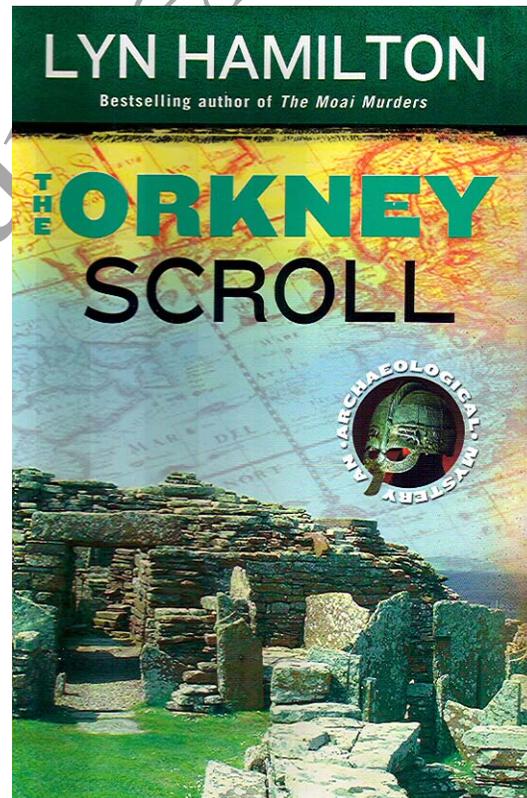
As the annual awards for outstanding crime writing approach, over the next several months I will feature works from Canada, Britain and the U.S. that are in the running for best crime novels of the year. In Canada these are acknowledged through the Arthur Ellis Awards (named for Canada's last hangman). In Britain such works receive the Gold Dagger Award; and their counterpart in the U.S. are the Edgars, named after Edgar Allan Poe. In each case these prizes acknowledge some of the very best work in crime fiction published during the previous twelve months.

This week's pick is by Canadian novelist Lyn Hamilton, and has been submitted for an Arthur Ellis Award for Best Crime Novel of 2007.

Lyn Hamilton

With almost a dozen novels to her credit, Lyn Hamilton is no stranger to the world of crime fiction. Building on her studies in cultural and physical anthropology at the University of Toronto, Lyn has carved out a significant niche writing archaeological mysteries. The first in her series, *The Xibalba Murders*, was nominated for an Ellis Award for Best First Crime Novel in 1997, and the eighth, *The Magyar Venus*, was nominated for Best Crime Novel of 2004. Other works in this series include

The Orkney Scroll, *The Maltese Goddess*, *The Moche Warrior*, *The African Quest*, *The Etruscan Chimera*, *The Thai Amulet*, *The Moai Murders*, and *The Celtic Riddle*, which was the basis for a *Murder, She Wrote* TV movie in 2003. Lyn's next book, set in Beijing and Xian, is due to be released April 3, and is called *The Chinese Alchemist*.



Lyn's books have clearly resonated with readers around the world, and have been translated into Chinese, German, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Hebrew, and

Croatian, with translations coming in Greek and Russian. Like her fictional sleuth Lara McClintoch, Lyn is addicted to antiques and lives in Toronto.

The Orkney Scroll
(Berkley Prime Crime, 2006)

Toronto antiques dealer Lara McClintoch has two problems: first, she has authenticated an expensive writing cabinet for a wealthy client, only to discover that it is a fake. To make matters worse, her client has been arrested—for burying an axe in the head of the dealer who sold it to him.

Lara feels at least partly to blame, and to salve her professional con-science and help put things right, she travels to Scotland, where the writing cabinet apparently originated. Her quest takes her to the Orkney Islands, off the northernmost tip of Scotland, and in the beautiful desolation of those barren isles Lara encounters an eccentric man she knows only as “Percy bicycle-clips,” a wealthy and glamorous couple who collect antiques, and an elderly recluse who holds the key to her puzzle.

With twists, turns, and conundra that challenge her readers’ imaginations, author Lyn Hamilton deftly combines a contemporary mystery with an ancient Norse saga describing the travels and exploits of a long-dead adventurer known as Bjarni the Wanderer, and his journey with a valued artifact. As she pursues her quest, Lara’s life—and those of others engaged in the same odyssey—will be put at risk, and more than one victim will be claimed before the puzzle is solved.

***An entertaining tale,
faultlessly told***

I have observed before that the world of crime fiction sometimes seems to be dominated by two extremes. At one end are police procedurals and thrillers—violent tales of child-abductors, torturers, and serial killers, filled with graphic accounts of slayings, autopsies, chase scenes and dramatic climaxes, usually involving yet more deaths. At the other extreme are “cozies”—traditional puzzle mysteries that sometimes feature crime-solving cats or little old ladies in quaint rural villages populated by loveable eccentrics, where the villains, once discovered, surrender quietly to the local constabulary.

To be sure, each extreme appeals to large numbers of readers, but it is refreshing, just the same, to run across a tale with an original story line, told believably, that carries the reader to new and interesting worlds.

The Orkney Scroll is just such a tale. Effortlessly it transports armchair travellers to an unaccustomed and intriguing place, and confronts them with a challenging puzzle. The author skillfully balances two stories, weaving them together as they head toward a compelling climax. *The Orkney Scroll* will appeal to readers seeking an entertaining tale in a unique setting, faultlessly told.

Footnote: When Lyn Hamilton died in 2009, crime fiction lost an original and evocative voice.

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