

The pen is mightier than the sword, revolver, rope, or lead pipe

Mystery and crime literature panel one of numerous offerings from Stratford's first Writers Festival

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Murder and mayhem were on the minds of the panelists and participants at a symposium for award-winning mystery authors, held at Knox Presbyterian Church on Sunday, Oct. 23. The panel was one of a myriad of events held over the course of the weekend by the Digiwriting Stratford Writers Festival, the first in what is planned to be a new annual event.

The panel included a handful of mystery writers from diverse backgrounds. Steve Burrows is a birdwatcher who incorporates his passion for all things fowl into his bloody stories featuring all things foul. He said one of the reasons he made his series protagonist a birdwatcher was to help combat a prevailing negative stereotype that paints birders as being anti-social.

Barbara Fradkin is a former child psychologist whose previous profession gave her an innate look at the dark machinations that drive people in their desperate moments.

"I have a fascination with what makes all of us go bad," she said; her belief being that everyone is capable of killing.

"The fun and the challenge of writing, for me, comes with setting characters up, to push the buttons that will drive them over the edge."

Fradkin, who belies a pleasant demeanor, says she's often pressed as to how someone like her, a "nice, healer of souls" finds herself writing books about murder.

"I've had the experience of looking into the eyes of a child, and a chill goes down my spine as they described something in that pre-psychotic way," she said, to murmurs of understanding from the audience. "But, who knows? Maybe they'll be fine. Maybe they'll grow up to be a CEO or something..."

Janet Kellough writes historical mysteries that take place in and around her home of Prince Edward County, Ontario when it was still part of Upper Canada. She does so as a means of fleshing out her own history, as well as that of her community at large.

Lastly, CC Humphreys says he was surprised when he was awarded the 2015 Arthur Ellis Award for Best Novel by the Crime Writers of Canada in 2015,

as he doesn't consider himself a crime writer per se. Still, his historical dramas, many of which are centred around a plague-ridden seventeenth-century London, England, tend to embrace a sense of urgency, murder, and the unravelling of conspiracies.

The panel was moderated by former CBC personality Barbara Budd.

Inspiration and the authors' own process as writers proved a prevalent topic that evening. Burrows cited the old adage that writers should "write what they know," hence his inclusion of aviary themes in his mysteries. Humphreys refuted the adage, saying it should rather be "write what you love." It was this, he said, that drives him to focus upon historical London, a city that he's fascinated by.

"The bones of your ancestors are literally that much below the surface," he said, indicating a depth of about a foot with his hands.

Fradkin laid bare that not all literary decisions come from a creative vein. When pressed by Budd as to why she put aside her main protagonist- Inspector Green, a police officer who has starred in 10 books thus far- for a new female hero, Fradkin answered, "My publisher told me to."

"Both the publishing world and the mystery world loves a series," she explained, adding that, as her new protagonist, Amanda Ducette, is an aid worker by trade, she'll approach mysteries through an entirely different lens than the inspector.

"A police procedural is a very specific kind of book," she said. "Inspector Green has a right to be at a crime scene, inspecting bodies. Amanda does not."

Kellough said that mysteries set in historical periods take a great deal of additional research.

"The legal system was very different back then," she said. "For instance, you could not take the stand to defend yourself. Without someone that could help corroborate an alibi, you'd be in real trouble. As well, there were no forensics... not even finger prints. It all came down to how good your lawyer was at arguing points."

Humphreys agreed. He noted how England in the 1600s didn't even have police officers, at least not as we know them. Instead, they had thief-takers, which were a kind of bounty hunter; what



CHET GREASON PHOTO

A panel on mystery and crime literature, held as part of the first inaugural Stratford Writers Festival, featured, from left, moderator Barbara Budd, and authors Steve Burrows, Barbara Fradkin, Janet Kellough, and CC Humphreys. The panel was held at Knox Presbyterian Church on Sunday, Oct. 23.

Humphreys calls a "proto-police-man."

When asked what makes mysteries such an ongoing popular genre, Burrows suggested audience participation.

"There's a passivity to some stories," he said. "A mystery is more participatory. The reader gets involved, and projects what they think is going to be the conclusion."

Fradkin opined that any fiction has mystery inherently in it.

"We wouldn't read it if there wasn't something we wanted to know," she said. She also feels that people don't read mysteries for the blood and gore, but rather for the human element that gets tied up in such extreme cases as murder.

Budd asked if the authors ever purposely muddy the waters with red herrings in an attempt to fool readers. In answer, Kellough said the classic whodunnit may be passé.

"Sometimes you aren't trying to fool the reader. Sometimes you're just telling a story," she said. "It's not really that relevant anymore. There's lots of crime stories that tell you right up front

whodunnit. Now it's more of a whatdunnit."

She further said she'd like to see mystery writers focus on other crimes besides murder.

"When was the last time you read a good bank heist story?"

Lastly, Kellough said the draw to mystery may be the same as that which compels people to read fiction of any genre: escapism.

"There's a solution, in mystery stories," she said. "A murderer is brought to justice. People like that. It's not usually how it happens in real life."

AN ANNUAL EVENT

The mystery panel was only one of the events held at the Stratford Writers Festival. Other events included one-on-one interviews, book signings, readings, pitch sessions, and a literature-themed brunch paired with live

music.

Organizer Heidi Sander, creative director of Digiwriting, a book marketing agency, says she plans to make the event an annual one. In fact, a handful of venues for the 2017 incarnation have already been booked.

Sander lives in Stratford, and calls the event a natural fit for the city.

"It's such a cultural, creative, and artistic community," she said. "We had people travelling here from London, from Montreal; but also local artists, musicians, actors, and students who have expressed an interest in writing."

"It's an amazing feeling to foster that amount of interest."

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