

Meet the Canuck Lisbeth Salander

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The wind is howling. Snow is piling up faster than it can be shovelled away. The days are short. Civilization as we know it is going to pot. Time to escape all that and curl up by the fire with some cocoa and a soothing book of detective fiction.

Something cheerful, though. Something that doesn't turn your stomach with gruesome scenes of sadistic torture, or remind you of all the loneliness and sexual promiscuity/dysfunction and existential drift that so burdens our culture.

Long gone is the asexual, complacent, angora-sweater knitting Miss Marple. Today's detective protagonists are quirky, emotionally bottled up and often tormented, like the borderline crazy Lisbeth Salander, Stieg Larsson's tattoo'd virtual orphan, or Henning Mankell's depressive Kurt Wallander, now being played on TV to broody, dishevelled, puffy-eyed perfection by Kenneth Branagh. You need something stronger than cocoa to deal with all the angst these characters generate.

Why can't fictional detectives be more ... Canadian? More hygenic, less tortured, more collaborative, more ordinary? More like the Beary family -- Bertram, Edwina, Philippa, Richard, Sylvia and Juliette -- products of the imagination of Vancouver's Elizabeth Elwood. The Bearys have personalities, but no neuroses, and they solve crimes by pooling their talents and resources without anyone's ego getting in the way.

Vancouver-based Elizabeth Elwood only began to turn out fiction relatively late in life. Her stories are fairly lightweight and her characters can hardly be called deep. And yet there is something about the stories and the characters that keeps you turning the pages.

Elwood is by vocation an opera singer with an interest in local politics who turned her hand to fiction writing when she was off work sick for a month and bored. She wrote two short stories about an opera-singing sleuth whose brother was a detective inspector. After she resumed work, the stories were forgotten, but a few years later, after some serious engagement with local politics, she decided to combine her theatre experience with civic politics-- an odd combo, to be sure--and what emerged was a bourgeois family who live on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast, and manage to stumble on and solve murders with the kind of peppy collaborative curiosity other families bring to solving jigsaw puzzles.

One of Elwood's stories morphed into a play, *To Catch an Actress*, in which she developed her ur-character, Bertram Beary, a wily, outspoken and politically incorrect city councillor, who became so popular with audiences that Elwood decided to give him a wife and children for her detective fiction.

Pater familias Bertram Beary is in stoic social thrall to his high-energy teacher wife Edwina, whose keen eye for celebrities and penchant for running into key suspects during endless shopping expeditions often yields valuable clues for two of her children, opera-singer Philippa and policeman Richard, the characters most directly involved in the crime-solving. The other siblings, lawyer Sylvia and Juliette, the stay-at-home mom who manages a children's puppet theatre, do their bit when needed.

A certain cultural literacy in readers is assumed. And occasionally the stories combine elite culture with issues ripped from the headlines. In *Who killed Lucia*, a story in her third volume, *The Beacon and other Mystery Stories*, Philippa is feeling sorry for herself after breaking off with her fiance. Her dad gives her Sir Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* to read to distract her. The crime Philippa is involved in, an honour killing of a Sikh bride and groom, casts the old story in a modern and rather jarring light.

It isn't easy for an amateur to write plausible mystery plots. I wrote a mystery novel years ago to see if I could pull it off, and it was very hard work plotting it; I am sure I could never write another. I find Elwood's serial short mysteries strangely compelling, in spite of being a bit far-fetched (no more so than the average Agatha Christie plot, mind you) and only just credible. I think it's because her Beary family is so agreeable. They're the kind of people you'd want to have as neighbours and invite in for the occasional drink or bridge game. They're lively and wholesome. They're not perfect, and they sometimes disagree, but they like each other. The fun of multiple mystery plots and a nice, functional family of civic-minded Canadian sleuths: Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.

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