

## At 70, a novelist is born

**Retired engineer Alan Bradley submitted 15 pages to a British competition, won the prize and sparked a lucrative bidding war for his six-book murder-mystery series**

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KELOWNA, B.C. — Alan Bradley picks me up from a Kelowna roadside. He's come to my aid after a taxi driver who misunderstood “Kettle Valley Tapas Bar & Grill” took me to the other side of Lake Okanagan, over the beautiful new bridge, to the Cattle County steakhouse in Westbank. I have no choice but to send out an SOS to the man I am already late to meet, hoping he will turn out to be a kindly sort.

“Don't worry,” Bradley says with a smile as we finally arrive at his local bar, a good hour later than our original appointment. “We have plenty of time. I'm in no hurry.”

His relaxed attitude is in stark contrast to the hype whipping around the literary world about this soft-spoken 70-year-old, who politely orders a second lunch so that I don't have to eat alone. The publishing phenomenon du jour, Bradley is a first-time novelist who has sold a series of six novels, across 13 countries, for an undisclosed (well into six figures) sum, a startling accomplishment that began with just 15 pages of typed text, and one close encounter with a forest fire.

First: the 15 pages. In early 2007, prompted by his wife, Bradley, a retired radio-television engineer, entered a small fiction competition – the Debut Dagger – run by the U.K. Crime Writer's Association. Sponsored by British publisher Orion, the Debut Dagger competition receives around 600 entries a year; entrants must submit the first chapter (3,000 words or less, or in Bradley's case, 15 pages) and a synopsis for a murder mystery.



(Jeff Bassett for *The Globe and Mail*)

The first draft took Bradley just a couple of days, but he then spent weeks polishing it, only just sneaking the first pages of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* in under the final deadline.

In June that year, he was told he made the short list. The following day, two of the judges called his agent to express interest in publishing the book, and one of them inadvertently let slip that Bradley's submission was the competition winner. His life changed almost overnight. Negotiations began immediately, sparking a bidding war, and on June 27, Bradley agreed to sell Orion the rights for three books in Britain. By the time he went to London to pick up the award on July 5, Bantam had picked up the U.S. rights and Doubleday had signed up for Canada. *The Sweetness at the Bottom of The Pie* was released in Britain last month and hits store shelves in Canada today.

Bradley remains remarkably composed, but confides – in very low-key fashion – that this is “an exciting time.” He is an engaging conversationalist, moving seamlessly between subjects – his favourite films (the rarely seen Alec Guinness movie *Tunes of Glory*; the Alistair Sim version of *A Christmas Carol*), his obsession with the mystical properties of light (“That was like Black Magic to me”), the voracious literary appetite of his British grandmother, for whom he bought Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy when she was in her 90s, “and she loved it!”

But given the enormous workload on his plate, doesn't he need to get back to writing? Shouldn't he be, you know, typing away furiously in a corner of a candlelit basement, fuelled only by coffee, desperately trying to finish the other books? “Oh, I don't worry about it,” he says breezily. “It takes care of itself.”

Set in 1950s Britain, *Sweetness* is powered by its indefatigable narrator, the precocious chemist and incipient Miss Marple, 11-year-old Flavia de Luce. Aided and abetted by her trusty BSA bicycle, Flavia careens around between the genteel village of Bishop's Lacey and Buckshaw – her family's stately home – attempting to solve the mystery of the dead man she discovered in the cucumber patch.

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It's a story of a different era – a more innocent period, Bradley says – and one that seems to have captured the current mood. “The response to living in disturbing times is to go to the polar opposite,” he says. “And it seems to me that 1950s England is the polar opposite of where we are now.”

For sure, *Sweetness* is an energetic romp – he calls it a “ripping-good yarn.” It operates within a particular notion of Englishness – of dotty old maiden aunts, afternoon tea and a clearly stratified, upstairs-downstairs society. “Enid Blyton for adults,” one of the Debut Dagger judges termed it. Bradley's own literary references – *Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Kite Runner* – are a tad more ambitious. “It was time we had a female protagonist in a book like this,” he notes.

He may have grown up in Cobourg, Ont., but there's a lot of Bradley in Flavia. Like her, he was brought up in the 1950s by a single parent, and had two older sisters (his father walked out on the family when Bradley was a toddler). And just like Flavia, Bradley was a resolute non-conformist as a child. By his own admission, he was a “very bad student.” How bad? “Bad enough that other parents were warned not to let their children play with me.”

Sitting across from this bookish man, it's hard to believe he was once a free-spirited truant who spent his days reading John Steinbeck while propped against the gravestones of the local cemetery. His problem, he explains, is that he “just didn't fit.”

“I really like the 11-year-old idealism of Flavia,” he says. “I remember that feeling of being absolutely unstoppable – that you could do anything.”

“And,” he adds, “I remember how quickly that becomes repressed at school – when you run into a brick wall of people who don't think you can do anything at all. They just want you to conform, to sit down and listen and keep your mouth shut. I consciously sat down one day and asked myself if I was going to cave in and become one of them. And I decided that, despite how hard it would be, I would much rather just stay me.”

His doggedness has more than paid off. The robust bidding war for those first scant pages of text resulted in a deal which will roll out a tidy sum over six years, and the anticipation for the first book currently swirling around blogs and online forums is huge. The Times of London listed *Sweetness* as “one of the hottest reads of 2009.” “This doesn't happen in a lifetime very often,” Bradley understates, scooping up melted brie with some flatbread.

He's determined to enjoy the ride. The Kelowna home he's lived in for the past 10 years with his second wife, Shirley, is sold. Their belongings are either boxed up or disposed of – “We have found it easy to do away with things,” he says with a shrug. “We can live without a popcorn machine.”

The plan is to travel. “I think we are going to be what they used to call footloose and fancy free,” he smiles, rolling the phrase around his mouth with pleasure. “We want to take a little while where we are not tied down before we slide into old age.”

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London is on the itinerary, as is Yorkshire – he is passionate about Whitby jet. Then there's Spain, Italy, Germany and Israel. Bradley hopes to visit every country that is publishing his books – not bad for a chap who, until that trip to pick up his Debut Dagger award, had never left North America.

Born in 1938, Bradley lived in Cobourg (about 100 kilometres east of Toronto) into adulthood, working as a radio and television engineer constructing and designing electronic systems. One of his first jobs was running 17 miles of copper wire into a radio tower in the middle of a swamp. He was employed briefly at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (now Ryerson University) before accepting a job with the University of Saskatchewan in 1969 to help build a state-of-the-art broadcasting studio. He stayed there for 25 years, until he retired.

Though he had been interested in writing all his life, it was the move to Saskatoon in his early 30s which led him to take it more seriously. He fell in with a literary crowd and joined a succession of writing groups. One of the first people he met in town was Brenda Riches, who introduced him to people like Anne Szumigalski, David Carpenter, Patrick Lane and Marie Elyse St. George. “These people were all so supportive of my writing – and at times extremely critical,” he notes with a sigh. “But what a great learning process.”

He achieved moderate success with a few short stories read on CBC Radio and published in literary magazines. He remembers everything he has written, and is quick to regale me with detailed plot synopses involving embittered wives and a man with a 400-pound ball of string. “I did a story about a man who married a dragon,” he says. “I enjoyed that kind of thing – not sure if people knew what I was up to.” He pauses to add, rather bewilderingly: “But in Saskatoon you could do that.”

He moved to Kelowna in 1994 when Shirley was transferred there for work. They bought a faux Victorian villa in the saccharinely quaint planned community of Kettle Valley. He'd taken early retirement to write, and that's just what he did, churning out screenplay after screenplay. He began with a biopic of John Hunter, an 18th-century Scot and self-taught surgeon who opened a medical school in Covent Garden. Then there was an action-adventure story about a couple of kids in a runaway plane – that one was optioned by a studio in Hollywood, but proved too expensive to make – and a western with a character called Bingo Barnes; it spawned a sequel, but neither sold. There were seven or eight in total, he figures, written across nine years.

And then, the forest fire.

It was the summer of 2003, and the Okanagan fires almost burned his neighbourhood to the ground: Bradley and his wife escaped with flames right on the tail of their green Lexus, after missing the first call to evacuate. Their house survived (their doorbell melted in the heat) but many others did not.

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The experience haunts him still. “We were different people in its wake,” he says. “It was as if a line had been drawn across my life, and I couldn't go back. I decided I needed to be doing something different.”

He left the screenplays behind, and started to work on his memoirs. In 2006 he started writing his first novel. One day, Shirley was listening to Louise Penny on CBC Radio talking to Shelagh Rogers about the Debut Dagger and suggested he give the competition a go, saying she thought he should write about the “girl on the camp stool” – a minor character he had created who had captured Shirley's imagination.

“All I could do was sit down with my fingers over the keyboard and find out who this girl was,” he says.

Six months later, not only had Flavia been fleshed out, she had taken over Bradley's life completely. Nevertheless, he returned from the Dagger awards and promptly gave himself a few weeks off. Then he sat down and wrote *Sweetness* in seven months flat. Only at that point did he allow himself to worry about what he'd gotten himself into. “I knew it was being looked forward to with baited breath,” he explains. “Everyone was waiting to see if it lived up to those first few pages. And they were absolutely thrilled that it did.”

With the manuscript of the second novel just delivered and the remaining four mapped out, Bradley has settled into a writing routine. He wakes at 4.30 a.m., makes tea, eats an orange and works his way toward his desk. “The hardest part of writing,” he confides, “is sitting down. Once I'm there, I'm good – I write about 1,000 words a day.

“After 35 years in the television business,” he says with a smile, “it's really not that much pressure.”