

CRIMINAL INTENT

Featuring: Donna Carrick

Interviewed by: Janet Costello



Donna Carrick is the author of The First Excellence: Fa-Ling's Map, which earned an Award for Excellence at the 2011 Indie Book Event. She's also written two other mystery novels and two collections of short stories. Donna is an executive member of [Crime Writers of Canada](#). She has been a member of Sisters in Crime for about 14 years.

Q: Your protagonists are based in Canada. Does this have an impact on the success of your books?

A: I'm not sure it does anymore. In the old days, we used to believe a Canadian protagonist was doomed to failure. These days, people tend to be better educated about other countries, thanks largely to internet access. People communicate more freely with others from all over the world, and there seems to be a greater understanding of Canadian culture than there used to be. In my experience, Canadians are well-received around the globe.

Q: How do you acquire the insider's viewpoint of a foreign culture?

A: Great wads of research! I have done so many hours of research it just boggles my mind. For *Gold and Fishes* I spent two hours a day for six months (before I even began writing), reading every news item I could find related to the tsunami of 2004. I read the *Jakarta Post*, *China View*, and the *BBC On-Line*, in addition to our own journalists. In my spare time (haha), I studied Bahasa Indonesia, the Indonesian language. Languages, and the words that are important to people, tell a lot about their culture...as does their music and art. For example, Indonesian lessons feature many common comfort phrases... would you like to sit down, would you like to have a drink that led me to believe Indonesians tend to be very concerned with the well-being of friends and acquaintances. Other languages I've encountered in my studies have given me different insights into those cultures. Also, in 2003 my husband and I made the trip of a life-time to China, where we immersed ourselves as much as possible in Asian culture.

Q: You've indicated that your writing has helped to exorcise memories of alcoholism and violence. Have you had feedback that your work has been cathartic for your readers, too?

A: First of all, I'd like to clarify that these memories of living in a home that had alcoholism and violence were part of my childhood. As such, for better or worse, they helped to define both me and my writing. In some ways, I may be a little too drawn in my expression of those experiences. I find it easy, after all these years, to discuss the past openly. Certain things that were done to me and to others in our home were not my doing, and I'm not willing to adopt or condone them by keeping them secret. I'd occasionally receive emails, tweets or Facebook messages from readers saying they loved that book or

that scene, and the scene they are referring to is most often one based on my own traumatic memories. My readers usually won't dwell on why a certain passage may speak to them. They may not feel as comfortable discussing painful issues. There are a lot of damaged people in the world, myself included, and each of us is responsible for finding a way to heal ourselves. Some readers have told me they are moved by the situations my characters must overcome. One reader told me she wept out loud over the scene involving Fa-Ling as a child and her primary antagonist. Her connection to the story meant the world to me.

Q: What does the title *The First Excellence* mean to you?

A: The original title was just *Fa-Ling's Map*. The concept came to me initially as a short story. My husband, Alex, and I were on a plane heading to China to connect with our daughter for the first time. (Our youngest child, Tammy-Li, was born in Guangxi Zhuang.) And I wondered...what about 20 years from now? Is she going to want to go back? What forces might push her to return to perhaps find herself or her roots? As her mother, maybe I'd give her a map. As the story developed into a novel, *The First Excellence* became the obvious title. Confucius teaches that a person should give himself over to the mastery of five distinct excellences. It doesn't matter what these excellences are, only that we should commit ourselves to them equally and fully, to bring balance and harmony, as well as meaning, to our lives. From this Eastern philosophy, the dominant theme that emerged was: Discover what's most important in your life. Is there one excellence we should aspire to, above all others? For me, it's family and friends, my connections with the people in my life. At some point we'll all be dust, so for me that's the only thing that matters. My character, Fa-Ling Li, took a journey into her own past, hoping to discover what her future would entail. The thing she most needed to learn was how to both give and to receive love. That was her First Excellence.

Q: Tell us about the *Toboggan Mystery* series.

A: Short stories fill a role for us in modern day. We're so busy, not only as writers, but as readers. Short stories allow readers to stay connected with authors, and to discover new authors, without having to make a big time commitment. In *Sept-Iles and Other Places*, every story

takes me back to a place I've lived as a child. Some of those places don't even exist anymore. I was an Air Force brat, and a number of the places we were stationed at have since been dismantled. Geography fascinates me. I believe it has a huge impact on who we are. There's the place that lives in our memories, and the place that exists today. Each story in this anthology reminds me of my temporary childhood homes as they used to be.

Q: How long does it take you to write a short story?

A: Depends on the deadline [chuckle]. Like most people, I can take as much or as little time as I can get. I can write a short story in a day, but ideally, I want a couple of weeks. Sometimes the best stories flow out quickly, almost like an automaton. But usually, for me, that's not the case. Ideally, I prefer to take the time and refine a story, and give it the attention it deserves.

Q: You've also been involved with short stories as an editor of the crime anthology *Thirteen*. What is your editing process?

A: I only recently started taking on professional editing jobs, primarily copy-editing for my authors. Prior to that, my husband, Alex, and I shared in the editing work for all of our titles. I'd read a manuscript quickly at first, with a red pen, then I'd re-read it as often as necessary, word for word. *Thirteen* actually had three editors – myself, M.H. Callway, and Joan O'Callaghan. We received strong, high quality stories. But, on our fifth go-round, we still found things we wanted to tweak. I advise anyone who is attempting to self-edit to give the task the time it deserves. After your first run-through, put it aside and then go back at it – cold. Otherwise, you run the risk of seeing the same mistake over and over again, and not recognizing it as an error. I do try to be thorough and just put in the hours. Being willing to work at it helps a lot.

Q: You are co-owner of Carrick Publishing. At the *Thirteen* launch you shared that it was the company's first printed book. Do you see a returning demand for books in print format?

A: If you're an established author, you're probably always going to have a print base. Do I see print books as being the dominant medium in the long term? No. Realistically, those of us who most love and cherish print books are aging. The younger people don't treasure print as we do. As writers, we need to be able to reach readers on any platform we can. Having said that, printed books can do things that e-books can't. You can walk around with a printed book and allow people to admire the cover.

You can take it to a launch party, to a promotional event. Also, print-on-demand technology makes it so much easier to produce printed copies than it used to be, without a huge overhead cost. That should help to forestall the e-print-eating wolves. I do think there will be a place for print in this industry for a very long time to come.

Q: You've been a mentor for the Crime Writers of Canada. Please tell us about this program.

A: This is a really, really wonderful program. There are highs and lows in terms of volume. When it's busy, we scurry around to match mentees up with mentors. The amazing Pat Flewwelling does most of the matching work. Then there are lulls. Each mentee has his or her own individual needs, things s/he hopes to gain from the program. This can range from basic help with story structure, advice regarding dialogue, pacing, editing, or even manuscript formatting. We are often reminded that agents won't look beyond page one unless a story is truly compelling, so those first pages are important. As a mentor, your approach will depend on what stage the individual mentee is at, as well as what the mentor can offer. It's exciting and interesting work to be involved in. I've met some great writers as a result of this program. One of my mentees, Bill Hall, was short-listed for the 2013 Unhanged Author. He wasn't going to enter the contest, and I encouraged him to do so. I take great pride in helping Bill that way. Some people don't realize how talented they are. Sometimes you need to help mentees with their skills. At other times, the most important thing you can do as a mentor is to help them build their confidence.

Q: How has being a Sister in Crime affected you?

A: I have loved Sisters in Crime. During the past few years, I've been on the board with CWC. We have our board meetings on the third Thursday, so I don't get to Sister meetings. But in the early days, my Sisters gave me the confidence to complete my first manuscript. The people I met through Sisters opened up my writing life in ways I couldn't imagine. As a result of those early contacts, I now network with authors at all stages and all levels of this craft. It's been a wonderful experience for me.

For more info on Donna Carrick and her books, visit <http://www.donnacarrick.com/>

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