

Criminal Intent

Featuring: Elizabeth Duncan

Interviewed by Arlene McCarthy



Elizabeth Duncan is the author of the award winning Penny Brannigan mystery series. Set in the fictional village of Llanelen in North Wales, her novels have won the [William F. Deek Malice Domestic Grant](#) as well as the [St. Martin's/Malice Domestic Award](#) and a [Bony Blithe Award](#). Her mysteries have also been nominated for both the [Arthur Ellis](#) and [Agatha Awards](#). A member of Sisters in Crime, Elizabeth lives in Toronto and spends several months each year in North Wales.

Q: Why did you choose to set your Penny Brannigan mysteries in Wales?

A: Long story, but in 2004 (or so) I found myself in a charming North Wales market town called Llanrwst. I thought if I ever decide to write a mystery, which I had no intention of doing, this would be the perfect setting. And then a few months later I started writing *The Cold Light of Mourning* and set it in that town. There's something old-fashioned about the town that appealed to me and it has a gentleness that felt right. I'm glad I chose North Wales. I spend a lot of time there, literally and in my imagination. It's beautiful.

Q: As a reader, I appreciate the strong sense of place you created in your descriptions of the small village of Llanelen. How true to reality are you in the setting?

A: Quite true. I use the geography of Llanrwst as a guide so if a character walks from the bakery to the Spa, I know what route she took. I have hundreds of photos of the town so I can describe the church, for example, in detail. But I fictionalize the setting, which I call Llanelen, as needed. I've chosen houses for some characters but interestingly, I haven't seen anything that looks like Penny's cottage. And I'm pretty vague about where her cottage is actually located.

Q: Give us an example of how you use setting to strengthen the suspense in one of your novels.

A: I'm not sure there is much suspense in my novels. But some of the action in *Slated for Death*, the novel I'm writing now, takes place down a mine. This is the blackest, darkest place you can imagine, so I'm hoping that will add a swirl of suspense.

Q: Do you purposely limit the use of Welsh words in your novels? Why or Why not?

A: I do. It's a difficult language for non-Welsh speakers to grasp. For atmosphere and authenticity I sprinkle in a few words here and there and then find a way to include the translation. As for character names, I like to use the Welsh version of a recognizable English name, such as Alun, Alys or Huw. I also use easy to understand Welsh names like Alwyn or Ifan. The most exotic name is Eirlys. I have an American publisher and the editors seem to want to keep things simple for American readers, as if they can't handle anything they don't already know.

Q: From reading the instructions on your blog for how to make Christmas pudding, I can tell that you are a very organized person. How does that organizational skill influence your writing process?

A: I hadn't thought of myself as being particularly organized so thank you for that. I like to have my head fairly clear of other things when I write so I'm not distracted by things I must do. I make lists in my life and I make lists in my writing. I have a notebook in which I jot down thoughts or words as they occur to me. When I finish the first draft, I'll start over on the manuscript to get familiar with it then read over the notes in the book and figure out where those words or ideas could go. I also keep running lists beside me as I work through the first draft. From a previous life as a journalist I'm mindful of deadlines and I respect and work toward them. However, I do not set aside specific writing times and I am not nearly as disciplined as I should be.

Q: What drew you into writing cozy mysteries (as opposed to other kinds of mysteries or other genres?)

A: We write what we like to read. I didn't think about it until I just started writing it. However, that may be because I feel comfortable with the scope of the traditional mystery. I love reading police procedurals but not sure I could write one with the authenticity and detail required.

Q: When I read your Penny Brannigan series I want to make an appointment for a mani/pedi at the Llanelen Spa. What inspired you to make Penny and her friend Victoria the owners of a nail spa?

A: Honestly, I have no idea where that came from. I've never been to a spa although I get my nails done every now and then. However, I realized that the main character would need what I call a hub job – something that would bring people (with information) to her.

Q: What advantage is it to write Penny as an expat Canadian who has been living in Wales for 25 years, rather than being a native of Wales?

A: It's probably easier for me to identify with her as a Canadian and adds texture and interest to her background and provides contrast with other characters. I wondered if the publishers would ask me to make her an American, but they didn't.

Q: I like the love interest and tension that is gradually developing between Penny and Gareth. Do you envisage marital bliss for Penny and Detective Inspector Gareth Davies in the near future? At all?

A: This issue has proved a real challenge. In the amateur sleuth novel, it's always good if the sleuth can get necessary information from the police but that's a fine line. Police officers aren't supposed to share info about cases they're working on. (Sorry, love, that's operational.) Many readers would like to see Gareth and Penny get together and he certainly would but in this matter, the character of Penny herself has completely taken over. She has made it clear to me that she does not want a committed relationship with Gareth. This is an example of characters living their own lives off the page and the author has to listen to them. They know what is best for them.

One reader said Penny is treating Gareth shabbily but I don't think she is. She has made it very clear she does not want to hurt him and she behaves toward him in a sensitive way that is mindful and considerate of his feelings. Her agonizing over the direction of their relationship has made clear across a couple of books. Unfortunately, no matter how hard I tried, she does not reciprocate his feelings for her. She's just not feeling it. Life's like that sometimes; relationships run their course. But who knows? She might meet someone in a future book who is right for her.

And from a plotting point of view, if Gareth and Penny did form a committed relationship, that would change completely the dynamic of the novels. Penny would no longer be an independent amateur sleuth, she should be one half of a couple. It just does not feel right.

Q: What advice would you like to give novice writers?

A: Get in with the people who are doing what you aspire to do. Join organizations like [Sisters in Crime](#) and be active. There's no point joining if you don't participate fully. Attend meetings. Listen. Talk to people. Read books in your genre as a critic, not a consumer. What did the author do well and where could the work be improved? Learn from the mistakes and successes of others. Go to conferences. Take notes at the panels. Watch good mystery television shows for elements like conflict, the layering of clues, reveals, tension, suspense and above all, dialogue.

Q: Tell us your best reader story.

A: In the third Penny Brannigan novel, *A Killer's Christmas in Wales*, DCI Davies gives Penny a diamond brooch in the shape of a snowflake. A reader told me that was the first book of mine she read and she liked it so much her husband gave her a diamond snowflake pendant for Christmas. Wow!

Q: How has your membership in Sisters in Crime benefitted you?

A: It has made conferences fun. I hear familiar, distinctive laughing and I know **Helen Nelson** and **Janet Costello** are nearby and that makes me happy. For logistical reasons, I don't get out to as many meetings as I would like to. I'd try to take my own advice and do better!

For more information about **Elizabeth Duncan**, visit <http://elizabethjduncan.com/>.

Arlene McCarthy is a former elementary school principal and is currently working on her first crime novel. We welcome Arlene to the *Crime Scene* team!

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