

Criminal Intent

Featuring: J. E. Forman

Interviewed by Arlene McCarthy



In her former life, Janet Forman was a hard working Canadian television producer who switched from cameras to keyboard to pursue a new career as a novelist. As a teenager she met Margaret Laurence in her home in Lakefield – and was inspired and encouraged to consider writing as a career. Really Dead is the first Ria Butler Mystery.

Q: *Really Dead* is set in the beautiful British Virgin Islands. How true are you to the setting?

A: I have been lucky enough to visit the beautiful island of Virgin Gorda several times ó the last time was four years ago. Ria's brother James stays in A Dream Come True Villa which is a real rental villa on the island. I was able to contact the owner who lives in Boston and she enthusiastically approved of its use in the novel. I have tried to be faithful in my descriptions of Virgin Gorda's beauty. The Yacht Harbour and the BVI's beautiful snorkelling spots are true to reality. However, I invented the Island of Soursop as I didn't want to tarnish a real island with a fake murder of my creation.

Q: What is the setting of *Crime Seen*, your next book in the Ria Butler series?

A: If Dundurn decides to continue the Ria Butler series the story takes place on a very large soundstage in Toronto where a movie company is making a docudrama about an infamous Canadian serial killer. When the lead actor is killed, Glenn suspects it is related to the serial killer, who is appealing his case. Another death on the set of the docudrama leads Ria to join Glenn in looking for the killer. I tapped into my background in television and reached out to contacts and researched production details to use in the novel.

I'm also working on a new series with two new protagonists ó Syd & Tru. The first book in the series is *Playback* and it is set in an exclusive private boarding school a few hours north of Toronto. The second story in the series is set even further north in Ontario, in a spectacular canyon near Thunder Bay that I visited while on a recent driving trip to Winnipeg.

Q: How long does it take to bring a book from the thinking and research stage to completion?

A: The first stage of thinking and researching takes months. Characters develop their voices in my head and scenes play in my imagination like little movies. Once the plot lines fall into place I research the details that I need. With *Really Dead*, when the opening line popped into my head, I really started to write the book. If I'm able to become a hermit and write with little or no interruption, my time at the keyboard is roughly 6 to 8 weeks.

Q: How do you weigh fact versus fiction in your books?

A: The line is blurred in *Really Dead*. Because I worked on a movie in the islands many years ago, I knew the reality of shooting a production there, so many of the details are based on my experiences. However, I had to take some liberties so the plot could develop the way I wanted. I covered those changes by having a character in the book say that *his* series are not normally shot this way. I also checked my details about the exploding boat with special effects professionals to ensure that what I was creating was plausible.

Q: When you started writing *Really Dead*, did you know at first it would be the first in a series?

A: Not at first, but by the time I finished the book I knew that Ria Butler had more adventures ahead of her and I wanted to explore them.

Q: Are any of the characters in the books based on, or inspired by, people you know?

A: All my characters begin as a caricature of someone I once knew, or are a composite of several people I have known. However, by the time the book is finished they have developed a life of their own and they're purely fictional. Characters in my book may talk about real people in the real world, but real people are not characters in the book.

Q: How do you see Ria Butler evolving as a character in the next books?

A: She will return to Toronto and move out of the apartment above her father's garage and into a townhouse of her own. Instead of a gap year between high school and university or between university and work, Ria had a gap decade in her 40s in which her work took her all over the world. Now that she has hit her 50s she is finally growing up, settling down, and starting a new career.

Q: What are some of your outside interests? And have any of these found their way into your books?

A: I am a travel junkie and have been lucky enough to travel a lot. My travels often provide the germ of an idea for my writing. Travelling provides settings and ideas. I also love cooking and in my new series Tru [Truman Watson] is an avid cook.

Q: What is the best advice you've received as an author? And what might you say to aspiring writers?

A: Read and write! Especially, read books that swallow you up and take you somewhere you've never been, or books that introduce you to someone you'd never get to know in real life. It's also helpful to talk to other writers. It's so encouraging when you can share techniques or discuss a writing problem you're both struggling with.

Q: What kinds of feedback have you received from your readers?

A: I have received some of the nicest emails from readers. It's such a rush to open my mail and be surprised that someone has taken time out of their day to tell me how much they enjoyed my book. That someone had spent their money to buy my book and then take time to reach out to me is always a thrill.

Q: Have any specific authors or books influenced how and what you write today?

A: Agatha Christie got me hooked 20 or 30 years ago. I love mysteries from the UK and gobble up new books when they come out. There's a feel to the British

mysteries that I really like. I am a big fan of Louise Penny's books. Her success is proof that Canadian mysteries can appeal to a wide international audience.

Q: Complete the sentence "Because I write mysteries I ..."

A: Because I write mysteries I need my head examined. It's a weird occupation, sitting alone and making up stories about people being killed. Seriously though, because I write mysteries, I pay close attention to details of the setting and the people wherever I go, because every setting and character I create later is fed by those recalled details.

Q: How has being a member of Sisters in Crime affected you?

A: It has made me feel that I am part of a community of something that's important to writers because we spend so much time alone in our work. It has also opened up new info such as the opportunity to donate books for various library conferences in the U.S.

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For more information about Janet, visit jeforman.ca

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