

CRIMINAL INTENT

Featuring: Kay Stewart

Interviewed by: Janet Costello



Kay Stewart is the co-author of A Deadly Little List and has recently published Sitting Lady Sutra. She is a past-president of Crime Writers of Canada. She has been a member of Sisters in Crime for less than one year.

Q: A Deadly Little List drew a comparison to Gilbert & Sullivan. Please elaborate.

A: The book was inspired by a performance of the Mikado by a small travelling Albertan company. It's a good vehicle to bring a small group of characters into a high tension situation. The Mikado is a light comic opera, so we were able to play off the comedy of situation against the dark happenings within the cast. It's also a good way to examine prejudices that have shifted between the late Victorian period and our own. One of the themes of the Mikado is conflict between tradition and change and that's a theme in the book.

Q: In your podcast interview, found on the Bloody Words 2011 site, you bravely shared an embarrassing secret. Would you tell our readers about that?

A: The story I told was about sending the manuscript of *Sitting Lady Sutra* to the publisher of *A Deadly Little List*. After many months they sent me a rejection letter. The readers liked my writing, but they felt there were problems with the ending, too many problems for an editor to sort out. So I sent the manuscript off to Touchwood, who accepted it readily. It was only when I was putting the manuscript together for the editor that I realized I had not included the second to last chapter in either submission!

Q: What is the meaning of the title, *Sitting Lady Sutra*?

A: The title has two references. *Sitting Lady Falls* is the main setting where the body of an unidentified young woman is found. The word, sutra, brings in several elements of the story. One is the central role of an Indo-Canadian family that I wanted to have reflected in the title. The other is the meaning of the word sutra, itself, which indicates a series of brief teaching stories or aphorisms and has the same root as our own word suture, meaning to sew, or stitch together. The novel is a stitching together of stories that connect to *Sitting Lady Falls* and this Indo-Canadian family.

Q: Danutia Dranchuk is Ukrainian, her co-worker is Hindu. Tell us about writing cultures different than your own.

A: It's important to me that I try to represent, in fiction, the diversity of cultures in Canada. When I created Danutia, people asked, "Why give her a name like that?" I chose a name that put her outside the dominant Anglican culture. Because I was reading Myrna Kostash's *All of Baba's Children*, I made her Ukrainian. I introduced Danutia's Indo-Canadian colleague in a *Deadly Little Death*. At that time he was a minor character, but one that many readers liked. For the second book, I expanded his role and the role his family played. To write about them took a lot of research. I've enjoyed reading books from that culture, for example, Arundhati Roy. I've also attended a Diwali celebration.

Q: The books are largely police procedurals. Tell us about your technical police resources.

A: Again, I do a lot of research— a good bit online or through books. Especially for the first book, members of the RCMP, Salt Springs detachment, were very helpful. The local coroner, Barbara McLintock, who is part of the Bloody Words Sunday workshop, was helpful for *Sitting Lady Sutra*. Also, when I finish a manuscript, I always have it read by a member of the RCMP.

Q: Emily Carr, a fixture in Vancouver Island art history, is infused in *Sitting Lady Sutra*. Will this be a continuing element in the series?

A: I don't think so— no. I thought I'd have more of her in the book than I did. There is a spirit of her, though.

Q: You are co-chair, with Lou Allin, of Bloody Words 2011. How has this impacted your views on being a Canadian mystery writer?

A: One thing I like about the Canadian Mystery community is it's small enough to be a community. I'm delighted that we were able to bring so many crime writers to Victoria. Certainly it's brought me into email contact with people across Canada and the U.S.

Q: Outside of your novel writing, where can we find your work?

A: I've published two literary short stories, one in *Other Voices* and one in *NeWest Review*. I've also co-edited two volumes of personal essays by Canadian women, with pieces in each of these.

Q: *A Deadly Little List* was written collaboratively with your husband, Chris Bullock. The third Danutia Dranchuk novel will be written with him as well. Tell us about the pros and cons of collaboration.

A: The pros include the fun of doing the research together. (Little grin and eyebrow raise - the third book is set in England.) The immediacy of having someone else who knows the book as intimately as you do, when you run into problems with plot or characters, is wonderful. On the other hand, Chris and I have quite different writing styles and

processes. When we write together we have to have a pretty tight plot outline, although that changes as we go along. My own style is much more intuitive (disorganized, chaotic). But one thing I feel about writing *Sitting Lady Sutra* was it was a vision that was fully mine. In writing it, for example, I began with the prologue, and knew how the story would end, with little in between. I often wrote scenes out of order. Then I had a job later, figuring out where exactly they fit in.

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

A: I've really appreciated the friendliness of the Toronto Chapter. The meeting notices have filled me with envy...such great topics. I look forward to interacting more with everyone in the future.

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For more information on Kay Stewart, please visit: <http://kaystewart.ca/>

Crime Scene, the newsletter of the Toronto Chapter of Sisters in Crime, is published every two months.

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