



“Bob’s Interview”

By Crime Writers of Canada Associate Bob Harris

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www.crimewriterscanada.com

Meet Marsali Taylor

Bob Harris is a Vancouver writer, book promoter and publicist.



Scottish novelist Marsali Taylor resides in Shetland, UK, an archipelago in Scotland lying between Orkney, the Faroe Islands, and Norway. It is the UK’s northernmost region.

She is the author of the Shetland Sailing Mysteries starring quick-witted live-aboard sailor Cass Lynch and her partner DI Gavin Macrae who join forces to investigate crime in Scotland’s northern isles.

Readers praise the novels for their clever plotting, lively characters, great action sequences and vivid descriptions of Shetland life and scenery.

"This series is a must-read for anyone who loves the sea, or islands, or joyous intricate storytelling." Ann Cleeves

I have not been to Scotland. It's on my bucket list. Here's why: In the 1950s and 60s, I grew up in the town of Quesnel, located in the Cariboo ranchlands of British Columbia's Central Interior at the confluence of the Fraser and Quesnel rivers.

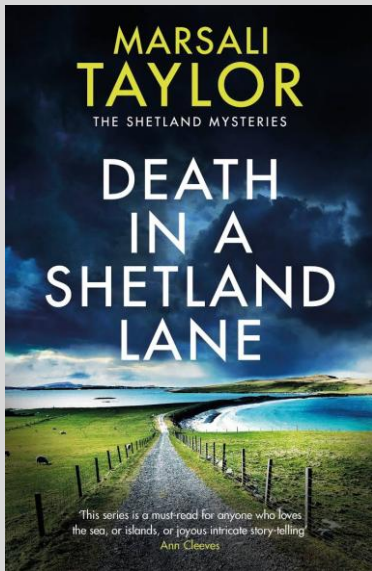
There was a very socially active Scottish community in town and my mom (Lorene) and dad (Howard) embraced it by joining the highland dance club. The social centre was the Royal Canadian Legion (Branch 94) which featured a traditional lounge and a large community hall.

The Legion formed a highland pipe band and my dad was a snare drummer and a tenor drummer. *Robbie Burns Night* at the Legion was a very big deal. And, my mom and dad always brought home haggis, black pudding and Mealy Jimmy's for my younger sister Marilee and I.

During my early teens, a Junior Boys Pipe Band was formed. I was the bass drummer. Parades and marching behind the senior pipe band was our big deal.

Today, at English Bay in Vancouver where I enjoy reading books, a handsome young bagpiper, newly arrived from Scotland, is dressed in tunic and kilt and plays the music that reels me back to my youth.

"Thank you to Bob and Winona for giving me this opportunity to share my world with Canadian readers. Bob's questions are unusual and inspiring – I had a lot of fun answering them!" Marsali Taylor



Marsali's latest novel in the series released on April 13, 2023 is published by Hachette/Headline.



"**Ann Cleeves** and I with Shetlie, the library's mascot: (Photo by Catherine Jeromeson.). Having fun with **Adam Oyebanji**, **Wendy Nakanishi** (lea o Harra) and **Alistair Liddle** on the Distant Shores panel at Shetland Noir. Wendy's holding up her 'Wanted' poster from the library's display."



"My photo of our cats - Miss Matty, to the right ... she's the original of Kitten in the books. She reckons I can't write a word without her active assistance. Her daughter Genie is standing on my WIP papers. I suppose other people achieve a tidy desktop."

* A "Bob Note" -- I have retained Marsali's UK spelling for this interview.

My conversation with Marsali Taylor:

Hello Marsali, thank you for making time for me today.

I am thrilled to interview you.

And, I'd like to acknowledge you as the first off-shore author to respond to the announcement from CWC Executive Director Alison Bruce that I am now interviewing authors from across Canada and abroad for "*Bob's Interviews*" postings in the Author Interviews Archive section of CWC's website.

Let's begin with a brief overview of your background and career as a teacher. What led you to Shetland Islands?

Well... Shetland is Scotland's most northerly archipelago, and its most Nordic – the Vikings didn't move out until the 1470s, when the Scots took over, so the language, architecture and way of life all have remnants of Norse times.

I didn't quite intend to come here, but back in 1981, in my final months of teacher training, our professors warned us that there weren't many jobs about. 'Apply for all the Scottish authorities,' they said, 'and take what's offered.'

My first job offer was from the Shetland Islands Council: a post teaching English and French in Aith, a Junior High on the west side of the Shetland mainland, with 70 primary and 70 secondary pupils. I thought about it, and thought how much I'd like being back in the country. I grew up near Edinburgh, but we had magical childhood holidays in a remote cottage in the West Highlands, and I'd loved being near the sea and living in a small community, so I went for it!

I added primary and secondary drama to my teaching, and my first published writing was plays for my pupils to perform, some in the distinctive Shetland dialect. When I was invalided out with bowel cancer, I was about to move on to teaching the grandchildren of my first pupils, and I'm still in and out of the school – my last visits were in Scottish dress, to address the haggis on Burns' day, and as a 1920s teacher for pupils playing at being schoolchildren of a hundred years ago during the school's centenary week. I recognise the children because they look like their parents!

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The Writer and Reader

When did you realize writing was your calling?

I always meant to be a writer – I have a Christmas-paper covered notebook with stories which I wrote when I was five or six, going by the spelling and reversed b and d! I've also still got some fantasy epics and short crime stories I wrote as a teenager – this is what comes of having lived in the same house for 42 years, nothing gets thrown out!

Describe the genres you have pursued. What is your preference?

Once I came to Shetland I began my first novel, a romance set in 1770, followed by another, the story of a young actress caught up in the American War of Independence. I enjoyed writing those, and I still write short stories set in history, as well as factual history, particularly women's history.

I've written a lot of plays, from short school project based ones for young children through drama for teenagers to serious plays for adults. They've all been performed locally, at our Drama Festival, and several are published by DramaWorks.

I wrote regularly for a monthly magazine, *Shetland Life*, for many years - that was excellent discipline as well as giving me a chance to interview interesting people. I also had a column in the ezine *Mystery People*, about life in Shetland, and I still review for *MP*.

Now I do a column in *Practical Boat Owner* – again, a monthly, but disconcertingly, this month's column is for the October issue, so I have to try and think ahead to what I'll be doing then when I've barely got my boat out after winter.

I'm mostly a crime writer and I enjoy that too – I like creating the puzzles and being fair with clues while trying to keep one step ahead of my readers. I'd like to write more history – if only I had a 36 hour day!

Who and what are your influences and why? And mentors?

My biggest crime influence is the American writer John Dickson Carr / Carter Dickson. I love his cleverness in creating a baffling situation and the way he misleads his reader while dangling his clues in plain sight – and at the same

time creating memorable, believable characters and an atmospheric setting. He can also be laugh-out-loud funny.

Another favourite is Ellis Peters, not the Cadfael books, though I love those too, but her 50s series starring wise, kindly George Felse.

I'm not sure I've really had a mentor; I just set out writing and learned as I wrote. I've loved doing courses through the Arvon foundation – a chance to learn new skills and meet other writers – and I do enjoy being part of the Westside Writers. As well as monthly meetings to share what we're working on, we have an annual weekend retreat, where we each bring a writing exercise for everyone to try, and pair up to edit each other's work.

I'm very lucky in my Headline editor, Celine Kelly – she zooms in on places I've fudged action or motivation with forensic accuracy. I enjoy the editing process. I feel each book gets to the stage where I've done my best, and it needs an outside eye, and I look forward to launching in again with Celine's comments to help me.

As a book reader, what genre appeals to you personally?

I read all sorts of books: classics, history, travel, modern fiction. The oldest book I've read was *The Iliad* (wonderful, to read the words of someone who lived 8,000 years ago, but what a dreadful life for women!) and I try to keep up with current prize winners – I loved Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*. I couldn't pick out one genre, but I like books that give me a window on another world, and I enjoy stories of unusual characters.

Do you have an ideal reading experience?

My ideal reading experience ...a book I haven't read before, with interesting, quirky characters and a plot which will keep me spellbound until I get to the end. Where? – well, I tend to read in bed, with my very spoilt tortoise-shell cat curled up under my chin. When would probably be in the morning, maybe starting about 5.30, so my husband, Philip, would have to be away; I no longer read in the morning because my fluttering pages wake him up!

Please tell me about the Westside Readers and list a few books they introduced you to.

The Westside Readers were started by our Literature Development Officer, Alex Cluness, way back in autumn 2002. At the moment there are six of us. We meet monthly in each other's houses, and take it in turns to choose a book, varying the genres. This year's stand-outs for me were *O Caledonia* by

Elspeth Barker, a heart-wrenching tale of a girl growing up in a grim Scottish castle, and *Rose Nicolson* by Andrew Greig, a vivid account of a young man during the Scottish Reformation. Our summer book is *Hy Brasil* by Margaret Elphinstone.

What books have you read recently? Do you listen to audio books?

Because of Shetland Noir, last weekend, I've read a lot of crime – I wanted to read one book by each visiting author. Some of those were e-books, but I do prefer print, especially if I'm reviewing the book – it's easier to flip back and find characters or incidents. However I also finished *Valkyrie*, an account of women's lives in the Viking age, *Sprig Muslin* by Georgette Heyer and John Dickson Carr's *The Murder of Sir Edmund Godfrey*, a true crime of 1668. I don't listen to audio books – I like to read at my own pace.

How is the library in your writing space organized?

My writing space is a little study, with a big desk, a glass cabinet with family memorabilia, and two large bookshelves. One, moving downwards by shelves, has theology, organised by when the book was written, Viking history (research for *Footsteps in the Dew*), English civil war history (research for my Prince Rupert short stories), Scottish history and the start of my romance collection, alphabetical, beginning with Joan Aiken and ending, at the top of the other bookshelf, with Hugh Walpole.

Below that is a doubled-shelf of my own books, dictionaries, then true crime, sailing books and finally forteen stuff like the Loch Ness Monster. However, we also have a downstairs library, with the complete works of Eng Lit (and some foreign too) starting with ancient Greek and world myths and working through Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens to modern writers like Atwood. There are shelves of travel books which overflow into the Shetland/Orkney collection in the living room.

The corner bookcase in our bedroom has the complete works of Georgette Heyer on the top shelf (my go-to in times of stress or sickness) and my crime collection (alphabetical) below. There are also Philip's shelves, with no organisation whatsoever, but he can still put his hand on any books he wants.

Last summer I created a new bookcase along the upstairs landing. The lowest shelf had to be split in the middle because of the plug, so it's a his'n'hers bookcase. My end, the lower shelf is the overflow of romances and

the middle one is my TBR pile, on the grounds that if I saw the spines as I passed I'd be more tempted to read them – then, once I have, there's room to get the doubled-up shelf from my writing room in.

The drawback, of course, is that I can't resist buying interesting books, so the shelf never quite empties. Phiip's end is highbrow stuff like Solzhenitsyn. The top shelf is for the cats; I knew they'd sit on it anyway, and knock the books down, so it seemed simplest just to leave it clear for them.

* * *

Shetland Sailing Murder Mystery Series

You write “trad puzzle-style mysteries”. Please enlighten me on the term.

It could also be called 'Golden Age style'. What I set out to do is create a mystery where the readers are presented with a murder and suspects, and given all the clues to work out whodunnit before the big reveal. I hope that I then surprise them at the end with who, why and how.

What inspired the series?

Hmmm... I suppose it came out of trying to think what I could write about that nobody else was already doing. I wanted a heroine who'd be practical and quick-witted. I love sailing and the sea, and I wanted to use Shetland as my background.

Please share your journey to landing your publishing deal?

A long one! There were the two historical romances, then I wrote the first of a still unpublished crime trilogy. Once I'd finished it, I took the Writers and Authors' Yearbook and phoned round agents who did both romance and crime, asking if they'd be interested in looking at a crime story set in Shetland. There was champagne opened the day that Teresa Chris said she'd take me on! She tried the trilogy round several publishers but it was felt to be too cosy (this was the late 90s). She suggested I tried something darker, so I invented Cass, the loner sailing heroine with a death in her past. The indie publisher Accent took me on, and published the first five books.

How did you deal with Rejection Notices on your submissions?

It was hard. The only ones I sent out were the two romances, and this was before books were sent by email; you sent off the first three chapters with a

return address envelope. I tried to joke about homing pigeons as each envelope came back, but by the 28th rejection I was feeling pretty discouraged, so I decided to try crime instead.

How many books in the series have been published to date? What is the timeline?

There are eleven books in the series, with a twelfth with my editor. I write one a year, but life in the books doesn't go as fast as that, so the twelve books last just two years for the characters. They're contemporary but I avoid references which will date them precisely.

Describe the setting, lifestyle, and ethnic profile of your main character Cass Lynch.

Cass is the sea-mad daughter of an Irish oil man and a French opera singer. Her father was stationed here in Shetland during her childhood, so she belongs to the community – she went to school here and frequently meets people from her youth during her investigations.

When she was a teenager her father was posted to the Gulf, and she was sent to her mother in France. She was homesick and longing for the sea, so she ran back to Scotland as soon as she was sixteen (aboard a tall ship) and led a hand-to-mouth sailing vagabond life for the next twelve years.

In the first book, *Death on a Shetland Longship*, she's living aboard her own small yacht in Bergen and working as a waitress, until she hears businessmen talking about a Shetland replica longship for a high-profile Hollywood film. She blags her way into being its skipper, and returns home.

In that book she had to confront her hand-to-mouth lifestyle and accept her real wish: to be an officer on board a sail training ship. That meant going back to college. She's also met Inverness DI Gavin Macrae, who was sent up to investigate the murder of one of the film people, and the relationship between them develops over the series.

Cass is fun to write about; she's quick-witted, clever, definitely resourceful and so far she's rescued herself from everything I've thrown at her. I try to make her the sensible everywoman we'd all like to be; you wouldn't catch Cass going upstairs in the lonely old house. She has her own biases, and I enjoy feeding those in to mislead the reader: what she sees and hears is reported accurately, but she may draw the wrong conclusions and lead the reader astray too.

Sometimes the reader can be one step ahead of her; for example, in *Grave of a Shetland Sailor*, sea-orientated Cass is having difficulty thinking of ways to transport a body across rough Highland terrain, but Gavin and the reader are both ahead of her in remembering the Highland ponies she met earlier in the book: tough, docile and trained to carry heavy dead things.

Who are the main returning characters in the series?

I keep the 'murder story' characters to one book, so that the series can be read in any order, but there are a number of 'series' characters. The most important one is DI Gavin Macrae, a Scottish Highlander whose native language is Gaelic. He's in love with Cass, but his career is important to him, and he'd like a settled life and a family, which can't happen if Cass is away at sea all the time.

There are Cass's parents, Dermot and Eugénie, who are divided on their ambitions for their wayward daughter: Dermot would like to see her married to a good Catholic man (like Gavin) with a tribe of children, but Eugénie wants her to think before giving up her career at sea.

Cass's former sailing teacher Magnie is her go-to person when she needs information about a suspect – he's an encyclopedia of local family history. I have a lot of fun with Cass's schoolfriend Inga and her family, particularly her young son, Peerie Charlie – I enjoy seeing my independent Cass being twisted round his little finger.

Inga's three children played a key role in *A Shetland Winter Mystery* – it was written during Covid, and I was missing my London grandchildren. Cass also has a companion aboard her yacht, a grey cat called Cat, and he gets his own romance in *Death from a Shetland Cliff*.

Describe how your book titles are determined.

It's so hard thinking of titles! My favourite was *A Handful of Ash* - intriguing, and a key plot clue. However when I got a deal with Allison and Busby for books 6 and 7, it was just after the TV Shetland series had begun, and part of the deal was that Shetland was to be in the title – hence, *Death in Shetland Waters* and *Death on a Shetland Isle*. My first publisher, Accent, was taken over by Hachette/Headline just before Covid (a huge stroke of luck for me), and they continued the Shetland emphasis, so the first five books were reissued with 'Shetland' titles and gorgeous photos. It's easier than trying to think of something clever ... They do look great together as a series.

Where are most of your fans of this series based?

I'm thrilled to say that Cass has fans all over! I can find my books in most Waterstones (our UK chain) and I've had letters from Australia, the US, Canada, Germany, France ... a book club in Oslo chose one to read ... it's so exciting.

* * *

***Death in a Shetland Lane* (published April 13, 2023 by Hachette /Headline), is the 11th book in the series. Give me the elevator pitch.**

An ancient book of spells causes the mysterious death of a beautiful young singer.

How about a quick glimpse of the research involved in developing the story?

I heard about the Book of the Black Arts through a post on FB from a local archivist. It was last seen in Yell, one of our north isles, and Yell also has various spooky stories associated with a haunted house, Windhouse, so I thought that would join with the spell book for an atmospheric setting. Research included, as always, working out Cass's voyage there (I've sailed it, but I had to check on tides and times) and a day spent on Yell, visiting the places she goes to and scribbling down description from a Cass viewpoint.

How long did the novel take to complete from concept to final manuscript readiness for publication?

Each novel takes a year, but I sometimes start the next book earlier, depending on the time of year it's set in; I spend the week the book will take place just going out and about, noticing flowers, birds, colours of sea and sky, tide times, weather, and writing them all down, to feed into the book as I write it.

It has some unique inclusions—specifically, the lengthy *A Note on Shetlan* which explains that "*Shetland has its own very distinctive language*", accompanied by a long Glossary.

Would you recommend a reader from North America, like me, should read these inclusions first before delving into The Prologue and the story? Why? Is it specific to grasping the manner of speech of your characters?

A difficult question. I'm not sure. I do want my Shetland characters to sound like Shetlanders, but obviously I can't use full-blooded written dialect – even native Shetlanders can find that hard to read. I try to catch the rhythm of Shetland speech, and I enjoy using dialect words, but only where the context makes the meaning clear, or after I give the meaning in the chapter headings. I think it's good to have a glossary, so that people can look up unfamiliar words, but I hope you don't need to read it first.

So here's the thing: I love to read. However, I am generally a slow reader. I like to feel the wordsmithing while crawling into the lives of the characters and the story.

With *Death in a Shetland Lane* manuscript, I decided to approach it from the perspective of a literary agent or a publishing house editor. Give me the first 50 pages and let's see what happens.

To sidebar for a moment, I spent close to three decades on the corporate side of the music and recording industry.

A veteran Music Director from an American reporting radio station for the major Billboard and Cashbox magazine record charts drilled into me "...if the song doesn't hook you in the first 28 seconds, ditch it."

I must admit, I struggled a bit with the dialogue in the opening pages of your novel.

However, when I discovered a few pages into Chapter 1 that a music group and a "*You're the Stars!*" TV talent show came into the picture...well, I could relate. You hooked me and I was prepared to cope with the foreign dialect. Hence, the reason behind my earlier question about the novel's unique inclusions. What do you think?

This is really interesting! This book has an unusual opening for my books: instead of being straight into Cass's narrative, there's a third-person prologue focusing first on Lizzie, a maid at the minister's house in the 1880s, and then on her great-great granddaughter, Lizbet – we meet her again in Chapter 1, when Cass takes over telling the story.

Because we're hearing the story of a mysterious burial from Lizzie's point of view, the writing is more colloquial, but actually there are very few dialect words used; it's the sentence structure which gives the impression of a spoken voice. It's only at the very last bit of the Prologue, Nan speaking to

Lizbet, where there's more dialect, like someen for someone and shouldna for shouldn't... so it does surprise me that you'd have struggled. I'm sorry!

Why did I start the book like this? It's partly technique: my own fault for giving myself a first-person narrator! I didn't realise how much harder I was making things for myself. As an amateur, Cass can't go interviewing people; her clues to the murderer, the clues I'm giving my readers, are what she sees and hears as she watches suspects. Because of this, I like to get her involved before the murder happens, watching how people react to each other.

The murder in my books is the outcome of a process, and usually happens about a quarter of the way in, rather than right away. In this case, Lizzie's handed-down story of the Book of the Black Arts is the beginning of a chain that leads to trouble, and I wanted the reader to have that link right at the start. It makes an atmospheric opening, the serving girl looking into the graveyard from her window at dead of night ...

I totally understand that it didn't work for you – I'm glad you persevered into the modern section and got interested after all!

When can readers expect the next book in the series?

It's with my editor right now, but I don't have a publication date yet. It's called *Death at the Shetland Folk Festival* and this one does have a murder early – Cass and Gavin are at a concert, and the dead body of one of the big stars is found backstage. To complicate things, Gavin's look-alike Canadian cousin is one of the suspects ...

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On Writing and Research

Briefly describe a typical week in your writing life as a mystery author.

A winter week: weekday: tea at 6.30, desk by 7.10, breakfast with husband at 8, brisk walk round the village, pausing at the pier to watch otters, at desk 9-11, with cat on lap, mid-morning coffee with Philip at 11, back to desk, lunch at 1, then an hour flute practice, back to desk for correspondence / admin, lie down and read (with cat) 4 to 6, dinner, back to work, stopping at 8.30 to do language work (currently Norwegian) – or possibly spend the evening at a rehearsal for either local pantomime or drama festival rehearsal, or (once a month) a writers' or readers' group

meeting. Weekend: Saturday morning, housework, and watch a film with Philip in the evening; Sunday morning, Mass.

A summer week: tea at 6.30, desk by 7.10 etc and work 9-11, then after morning cuppa with Philip, if it's at all weather, take the boat out and head off up the voe with a picnic. Back for lie-down, 4pm, normal evening at my desk, except for Mondays, when I teach sailing to children. Also, we tend to get a lot of visitors in summer, so I take them out to show them Shetland.

My writing year: I mull over my next plot and characters during the summer, and begin writing come September, as the days shorten, then write hard through the winter and spring, with a May deadline in mind.

If you were tasked with organizing a Shetland tour for a script writer, a location scout, and a television producer from Malta who were looking for three historical crime scene sites, where would you take them?

Historical crime sites in Shetland is a rather difficult one – we don't have many. I'd maybe start with Jarlshof, a World Heritage archaeological site at the south end of the island, with house ruins from the Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Pictish times, Viking times and medieval Scots. Nobody knows quite what happened to the Picts living in their wheelhouse when the Vikings arrived, but their usual way was to kill the local men and enslave the women, and DNA results suggest that happened here too. The medieval Scots lairds who replaced the Vikings weren't known for their kindness to their tenants either – the formerly free Norse Shetlanders were suddenly forced to cast peats for the laird and give him rent in butter and cloth.

My next visit would be out west, where a girl called Maggie Twatt lived with her mother and sisters in the 1860s. She was thought to be pregnant, though she denied it, and rumour went round that she'd had the baby, but it wasn't to be seen. The doctor examined her and said she'd had a child. He found the baby dead, thrust behind a haystack. Her family insisted she must have birthed it alone with nobody knowing, though they were all around the croft at the time. The autopsy said the child had been struck on the head. Maggie got off with two years in prison, for concealing a birth; however local gossip said it was her older sister who'd killed the baby, and that it wasn't the first.

Finally, to Lerwick, where a mustard-coloured house sticks out into the main shopping street. This house was the scene of Shetland's only mass murder, in the 1880s. The maid of the house, who slept in the kitchen, was woken by screams upstairs, and workmen next door also heard the cries of 'Murder!'

The men went up to investigate and found Mrs Williamson and her daughter pulled out of the bed with their heads split open by an axe. Mr Peter Williamson and his two sons were in another room, all dead; Peter was wedged against a table, the razor still in his hand, and the younger boy between his knees. A dreadful, inexplicable story.

* * *

Explain why holding an International Associate Membership in Crime Writers of Canada benefits your career?

Of course I hope it'll make Canadian readers aware of my series, but the real reason is that I had such fun in Canada at first Bouchercon then Left Coast Crime, and met so many lovely people, that I wanted to keep up the connection.

Are you a member of other writer organizations?

Yes, the Crime Writers Association.

Please share a few "light bulb" moments you have experienced during your journey as a writer.

I'm very lucky - I have at least a couple of these each book, when suddenly I realise (or my brain works out) that character A could be made to connect to character B through character C, or that plot strand A is actually connected to plot strand B via ... I can't give actual examples without spoilers, but it's part of the fun of the book coming together in my head.

What major milestones and accomplishments come to mind?

My very first published book, *Two Shetland Plays* ... then my first self-published book, *Women's Suffrage in Shetland*... then the publication of *Death on a Longship* ... meeting lovely, friendly fellow writers at the CWA conference ... the offer of a three-book deal from Headline ... my first conference abroad, Bouchercon ... receiving fan mail to remind me that people out there are reading the books and believing in my characters ... earlier this year, the huge honour of being invited as a Scottish writer to be the keynote speaker for the German group *Moderische Schwestern* - I never thought I would be asked to represent my country for anything, and I was so proud.

What are you most grateful for in your writing career?

The constant support of Philip, who accepts my writing as proper work (he's an incredibly talented composer, so he understands about artistic endeavours) and is always ready to celebrate with me.

You were on the organizing team of Shetland Noir 2023 (June 15–18). Describe what the event is and what your role was.

Shetland Noir was a weekend crime festival here in Shetland, including headline names like Val McDermid and Richard Osman, panels of authors, workshops and talks on local crime topics. I was one of the curators – Ann Cleeves was the other – and we worked together, along with the staff of Shetland Arts, who funded the festival, to create a programme. I was the person on the ground, while Ann approached the big names. Once the festival began, then I took over as compere. I also did a lot of baking! – the Westside Writers decided to welcome their fellow authors and crime fans from all over the works with afternoon cake.

What opportunity emerged that led to you travel to Toronto and attend the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention held during October 12–15, 2017?

I'd always wanted to go to Canada, so when I was told about Bouchercon I took it as the perfect excuse. Philip came too; I persuaded him that we should make a holiday of it, so we flew over to Vancouver and had three days there, then we went to the Grizzly Bear Lodge in the heart of the Rockies for three days more. I went out on guided walks in the wilderness – and yes, had a fantastic bear sighting – while Philip stayed in our lovely log cabin, stoked the stove up to sauna heat and composed music.

He still gets wistful about how nice that was when the quiet country life gets unusually busy. Then we went on to Toronto, for Bouchercon, and I had a wonderful time there too – it was my first big conference, dauntingly huge compared to Bloody Scotland, but everyone was so friendly that I felt completely at home.

I attended the Left Coast Crime convention at the Hyatt Regency hotel in Vancouver March 28–31, 2019. You were there. And, you've expressed to me your desire to attend the Left Coast Crime "Seattle Shakedown" April 11-14, 2024.

Why are these two conventions important to you?

Bouchercon and Left Coast Crime are both wonderful opportunities to meet new readers and sell your work to them. They include fun mingle events as well as panels where you can talk more specifically about your books, so there's a lot of opportunity to make your work known. It doesn't matter whether you're self-published or traditionally published – if you get your books to the bookshop, readers will buy them. On top of that, crime authors are such a friendly bunch, and writing can be a lonely business, so it's lovely just to hang out with them. I was delighted that several friends from Canada came over to Shetland Noir – it was so great to see them again.

Are there other writing and publishing conferences, book fairs and related events that you would like to participate in or attend during 2023 and 2024?

I've got an event in Anglesey in September, then back to Germany in October, for the Murderous Sisters conference, and I'm appearing at Iceland Noir in November. I'm very keen to come back to Left Coast Crime in Seattle – via Canada, thanks to kind friends there – and I've also been invited to Malice Domestic. I'm looking forward to all of them.

* * *

Thank you for this interview, Marsali. It has been a pleasure discovering your work and success. To wrap up our conversation, kindly give me flash answers to:

Your favourite beverage.

Drinking chocolate, preferable with cream on top – white chocolate if I'm sailing.

A notable Shetland cuisine you would introduce to the Malta crew.

Bannocks with rhubarb jam, and tattie soup so thick the spoon stands up by itself.

A motivational book that inspires you when the slogging gets tough while re-writing a manuscript.

I don't think I have one ... I just keep slogging.

Your favourite Shetland Islands landmark.

My own sailing territory, Swarback's Minn, seen from the cockpit of *Karima S*.

An unexpected and thrilling moment you experienced as a teacher.

I had this moment every year: when the chaos of rehearsing a whole school pantomime, lunchtime after lunchtime, came together in performance, and my bairns made their parents, grannies and the whole west side laugh till they cried. They came off stage high as kites and so proud of what their hard work had achieved. It's something they all remember even now, and reminisce about when they meet me.

Out in my sailing territory.



Photo by Wattie Ramage.

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