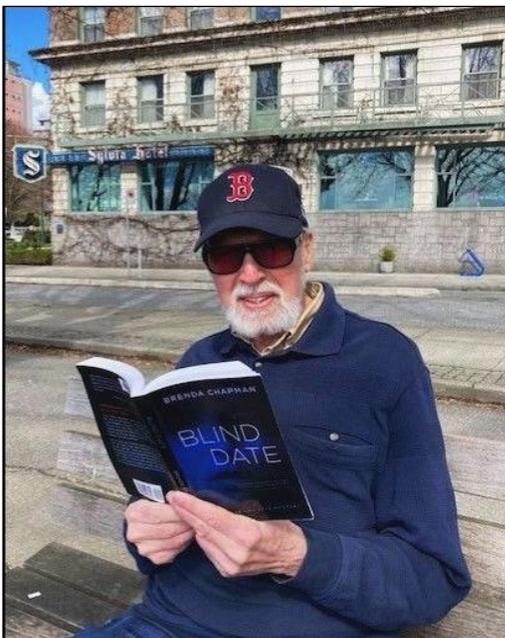


**\* Published by Winona Kent**—Crime Writers of Canada 2023 Vice Chair and BC/Yukon Representative—in her CWC Regional Newsletter, March 2023 edition.



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

*"As the 2023 Major League Baseball season gets underway, there is no better time to enjoy Vancouver's West End.*

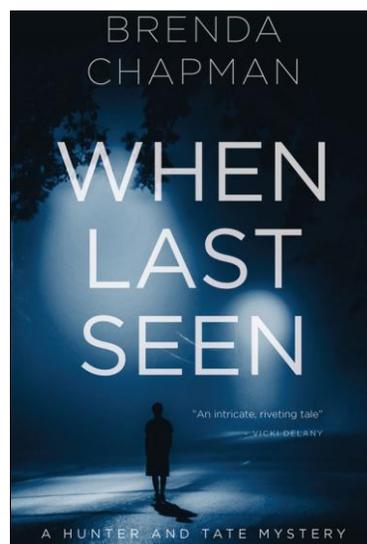
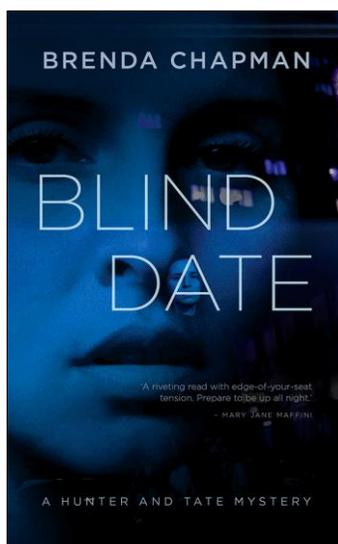
*The cherry blossoms, the sports bars, and reading a page turner mystery at English Bay before lunch at the historic and haunted Sylvia Hotel."*

This month's interview is with Ottawa crime mystery author **Brenda Chapman.**

*"Thanks so much Bob, and to Winona as well. This is a great service you are offering Canadian authors. I hope our paths cross if I make it to the next Left Coast Crime!"*  
Brenda Chapman

**\* Bob Harris, CWC Associate, in conversation with Brenda Chapman:**

**Brenda Chapman's work** has been shortlisted for several awards, including four Crime Writers of Canada Awards of Excellence. She penned the lauded Stonechild and Rouleau series and released *Blind Date* in 2022, the first in a thrilling new series. *When Last Seen*, second in the series, hits the shelves in April 2023. Brenda is currently penning her 25th book.



## **Hello Brenda, I appreciate you for making time for me.**

I would like to acknowledge you as the first author to respond to the announcement from CWC Executive Director Alison Bruce that I am now interviewing authors from across Canada for postings on the newly created "Bob's Interviews" category in the Author Interviews section of CWC's website.

- My opportunity emerged from a year of interviews with BC/Yukon authors for CWC Vice Chair and Regional Representative Winona Kent which she published in her monthly CWC Regional Newsletter.

While undertaking research for your interview, I was intrigued by the diversity in your catalogue: two crime fiction mystery series, a middle grade mystery series, a novella mystery series, three standalones, and short stories.

## **Let's begin with a snapshot of your career as a special education teacher, a communications advisor in federal government, and what led you to becoming a novelist.**

### ***The Writer and Reader***

#### **When did you realize that writing was your calling?**

Hi Bob and thank you for this opportunity. After reading your fascinating bio, I'd like a crack at reciprocating 😊

I enjoyed writing from a young age and always had a knack for it if school writing assignments are a yardstick. I wrote poetry in high school and took a creative writing course in university, but I'd never met a published author and never considered writing as a career choice. It wasn't until I was home with my daughters that I tried writing a middle-grade mystery, mainly to see if I could do it. The book got picked up by the small publisher Napoleon Press in Toronto, and I was hooked.

#### **What excited you about writing mystery?**

Mysteries are what I've always loved reading since I discovered Enid Blyton and her Secret Seven and Famous Five books. I studied English lit in university but would reward myself with a crime fiction novel after slogging through assignments. *In Winter's Grip*, my first adult standalone, was not supposed to be crime fiction, but a body showed up in the second chapter and I decided to go with it ...

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

My answer could take up pages – every good book I’ve ever read has influenced me in some way. I was particularly impacted by Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school. More recently, Denise Mina, Michael Connelly, Jane Harper, Adrian McKinty and Deon Meyer have captured my attention. As for mentors, I consider Mary Jane Maffini my friend and mentor. She’s always available to lend support or share a laugh, and I value her so much. More recently, Judy Penz Sheluk has been a terrific friend and support. Jim Sherman, owner of Perfect Books, has been a mentor in the book business. We’ve had many chats and he continues to promote my work and sell at my launches. I have to say that the writing community is made up of exceptional people – these are but three of a long list of treasures I’ve met over the years.

## **As a full-time author with 24 books published – your latest, *When Last Seen*, set to launch on April 1, 2023 – please describe a typical week in your writing life.**

The only thing predictable about a week in my life is the unpredictability. Some weeks, I write every day, usually late morning into the afternoon. I spend some time working on marketing and publicity almost daily as well. If we take this week as an example, Saturday morning I posted on my weekly blog, and I worked on my latest manuscript off and on over the weekend. I organized tax receipts Tuesday and Wednesday, was interviewed Thursday, and got in a bit of writing late in the day. I answered emails from readers and kept up with social media each morning. Somewhere in there, I did some promotion for my upcoming book launch. I capped off the week by attending a book club Friday evening as their guest author.

## **Do you have an ideal reading experience?**

I like to sit in the leather chair in my office to read, and on occasion, to read all day long, letting all my chores and worries go on the back burner. I don’t do this often lately because life is too busy, so it feels like a guilty pleasure. A lost reading day recharges my battery and motivates me to write the next day.

## **What books have you read recently? Do you listen to audiobooks? How do you organize your book library?**

The last books that I’ve read include two for a book club that I’m in, *Demon Copperhead* (Barbara Kingsolver) and *Lessons in Chemistry* (Bonnie Garmus). I’m working my way through the entire series of Benny Greissel

books by Deon Meyer and just finished book five *Icarus*. I'm currently reading *The Sleeping Car Porter*, by Suzette Mayer a Giller award-winner. I have read e-books, usually when the book is hard to acquire at my local bookstore, but prefer print. I've never listened to a complete audiobook (true confession) although my books are available in this format.

### ***The Stonechild and Rouleau Mystery Series***

**I was able to source *Shallow End* (2017) and *Closing Time* (2020) from the Vancouver Public Library. I'm curious about what inspired you to launch a police procedural?**

I'm a huge fan of the police procedural genre, having read many over the years. I like the character development of the main protagonists through a series, the varied settings, and the crime puzzles. The police make for logical sleuths with difficult jobs. In addition, the more I've gotten into writing this type of book, I've come to appreciate the genre conventions and the story framework as the author takes the reader through an investigation.

**Your first novel *Cold Mourning* was published in 2014 by Toronto's *Rendez-Vous Crime*, later acquired by Dundurn Press. What creative spark caused you to write this story?**

I had just completed my second standalone novel and decided to write a series. Since I enjoyed the police procedural genre, this seemed like a good fit. I've always liked to experiment – short stories, middle grade, adult, adult literacy – going with the credo to never write the same book twice and to keep on pushing my horizons.

**Was your work in the federal government's Department of Justice on the Indigenous file (formerly the Aboriginal file) a motivator in developing the series?**

Yes, my first publisher Sylvia McConnell said that a series needed a hook. My main file at Justice at the time was the then-called Aboriginal file. I was reading the news clips every morning and so depressed by all the issues, such as the conditions on reserves, the murdered and missing Indigenous women, foster care, racism. Kala Stonechild grew out of this knowledge and the respect I had and still have for my Indigenous colleagues and friends. I wanted her to be intelligent, damaged but resilient. Kala became my 'hook' in a sense.

**Describe the setting and lifestyle of your two main characters.**

Kala Stonechild grew up in foster care and she's a loner as well as lonely, not really belonging anywhere. She's independent and likes working on her own. In book two *Butterfly Kills*, she lands in a house in the forested west end of Kingston, Ontario with Lake Ontario frontage. She also ends up fostering a teenage girl by book three, throwing her world upside down.

Jacques Rouleau is Kala's staff sergeant and they develop an almost father-daughter bond over the series. In *Cold Mourning*, book one, he's still in love with his ex-wife who has remarried. He lives alone and is dissatisfied with his life. He transfers to Kingston in *Butterfly Kills* to look after his aging father and moves into his condo. He's been a workaholic his entire life and is trying to find balance.

**How long did it take to complete the first book from concept to release?**

It normally takes me a year to write a book, including the editing and rewriting. *Cold Mourning* then took an additional year to get into the publishing queue and find its way to print.

**Kindly give me a brief overview of your journey to landing a contract with Dundurn which resulted in a 7 book series.**

Dundurn bought Rendez-Vous Crime (Napoleon Publishing was their children's imprint) and published my second standalone. I submitted the *Cold Mourning* manuscript to Sylvia McConnell who was working as an acquisitions editor for Dundurn at that time. She liked the book, and offered me a contract, but only for the one book. I went on to write the next two instalments without contracts and was fortunate to have each accepted. It was around this time that Dundurn said they wanted to offer me a contract for the rest of the books in the series and asked how many? I pulled the number seven out of the sky. As it turned out, I was ready for a new challenge after book seven.

**On both books I acquired from VPL, I noticed a price listing in British currency. Was the series available in UK bookstores?**

I believe it is although I'm not aware of the inner workings of Dundurn's marketing strategies.

**In 2021, your first two books hit the “Top 10 audiobooks from UK Public Libraries” list. *Cold Mourning* placed #2 (JK Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was #1). *Butterfly Kills* placed #8 among bestsellers by Ian Rankin, Michelle Obama, Stephen Fry, Marion Keyes and other notables. What was the attraction that the British audience embraced?**

Yes, and the two audiobooks placed first in New Zealand and Australia the same year! I have no idea how this happened, but it certainly was remarkable and encouraging. I think the Canadian setting is attractive to readers from afar even though we’re often told to set our books anywhere but in our own country to make sales. I also received correspondence from an L.A. screenwriter who told me the two audiobooks were on his public library’s top ten list for months in a row, the reason he listened to them. He said that the stories were compelling and he really liked Stonechild.

**Was it difficult to let go of Kala Stonechild and Jacques Rouleau with the 2020 publishing of *Closing Time*?**

It was bittersweet. I still sometimes find myself wanting to insert them into my latest series. I felt, however, that it was time to start a new project and I’m growing fond of my new cast of characters.

**Reflecting on the character development and transformation of Kala and Jacques and the themes you explored, what would you say is the central theme and moral function of the series?**

A deep question! I think one takeaway from the series is that people need meaningful connections to thrive, and family can be the one you choose. The books deal with some difficult societal issues, such as forced marriage and teenage prostitution, and I hope shine a light on the effect trauma can have on a person. If the stories broaden the conversation or change how someone looks at another’s situation, then I feel my work has value.

**Today, my understanding is that Dundurn will be re-issuing the series with new softcover artwork. Congratulations on that! How did it come about and why now?**

Thank you. The last five books are also being made into audiobooks, which I understand will be released in May. I believe the series has done so well that Dundurn decided to reissue them with refreshed covers and another light editing.

**In February, CWC Webinar Coordinator Erik D' Souza hosted a "Optioning Your Work for TV/Film" webinar with International Associate and award-winning UK Film/TV producer and thriller author Mark Grenside. What were you able to glean from that session?**

Mark gave honest insight into the world of television and movie production, reinforcing a lot of what I already knew. My Stonechild series was optioned for television for a few years by an L.A. screenwriter who had to bow out after serious health issues. Another L.A. screenwriter (whom I mentioned earlier) said the series should be produced in Canada and he'd love to work on the project if I ever secured a producer. I believe the books would make for great television but the trick still remains to find that producer or person in the industry who sees the same potential and has the connections to make it happen.

### ***The Hunter and Tate Mystery Series***

**What inspired this series?**

I liked writing a police procedural series and leaned toward starting another. Again, there was a need to find a hook and to change up the situation and characters. I decided to have a cop and an amateur sleuth-type duo. The idea to have Ella Tate be a laid off reporter who starts a true crime podcast seemed current and a bit out of the box.

**Who are your main characters?**

Ella Tate's story features prominently in book one, *Blind Date* when she becomes the target of a person out for revenge. She meets Detective Liam Hunter when he's assigned to her case. Liam's story begins to flesh out in book two, *When Last Seen*. The beauty of a series is that a different character or characters can come to the fore, keeping both me and the reader interested. Liam is a dogged but quiet man, very attached to his sister and her family. He's taken in a stray cat that he hasn't named. He hates police politics and keeps himself apart from any intrigue, content to remain a detective. He's also soft-hearted, a trait he attempts to hide by appearing aloof.

**Describe the setting, atmosphere and mood you established in the debut of *Blind Date* published by Ivy Bay Press in 2022?**

*Blind Date* is set in Ottawa with part of the story taking place in the small town of Almonte, about a half hour away. The story occurs in autumn, so I

aimed for that cool, sometimes rainy setting mixed with brilliant, gorgeous days – blue skies and dead leaves crunching underfoot. Many of the suspenseful, grittier plot bits take place at night, the scariest time to be roaming the streets or lost in a forest, in my opinion.

**Your next novel *When Last Seen* is scheduled for release in a few days. Please give me the elevator pitch and theme.**

A three-year old boy goes missing from his west end back yard. Did he make his way to the Ottawa River behind his house or was he abducted? Nine months earlier, a foreign exchange student disappears from a party and her case remains unsolved. Shady suspects abound as Detective Hunter probes into the missing boy's family while Ella Tate works to track down the university student. The two cases seem unrelated but unsettling patterns begin to emerge. And then a body is found on the Ottawa Parkway ...

**Is book number three in progress?**

Yes, and I'm about halfway through the first draft. I'm a pantsner and working through the plot for this one is keeping me up at night.

\* \* \*

**You have been active in several writer organizations, including two terms as the CWC Ottawa/Eastern Ontario Director (2020-22) and two terms as President of Capital Crime Writers. How has your participation benefitted your skill set as a storyteller and profile as a mystery/thriller novelist?**

Volunteering in both organizations has been extremely rewarding, mainly because of all the writers and readers I've met and gotten to know. If I have advice for anyone in the business, it is to get involved in either a local writing group or Crime Writers of Canada because of the connections you will make in addition to all the inside knowledge you will gain. Capital Crime Writers in particular expanded my knowledge of policing and crime-fighting because of all the terrific guest speakers who came to the meetings.

**What writing and publishing conferences, book fairs and related events would you like to attend in 2023 and 2024?**

The pandemic is still playing on my mind in that I haven't seriously considered going to any conferences. I am toying with the idea of Left Coast Crime next year if anyone is looking to share a hotel room – my husband says to add 'female' after 'anyone'. ☺

**Please share a few “light bulb” moments you have experienced during your career as a writer. What major milestones and accomplishments come to mind?**

So, my light bulb moments usually involve how tough this business is for writers and how little monetary compensation we receive for all the hours and hours of work. As for major milestones and accomplishments, being nominated for eight different awards felt great even though I didn't win any ☺ Every time someone invites me to an event, reviews my book, or sends me a note about how much they've enjoyed my books feels like an accomplishment. I'm working on my 25<sup>th</sup> book, so this could be categorized as a milestone.

**What keeps you writing?**

I still love making up stories and discovering new characters. I continue to amuse myself when I sit down at the computer. Also, I receive so many kind, encouraging emails from complete strangers who've enjoyed my books. They can motivate me even on a gloomy day.

**Thank you for this interview, Brenda. I've enjoyed reading your work. To wrap up our conversation, kindly give me flash answers to:**

**Your favourite beverage.**

I've been known to enjoy the odd glass of red wine, preferably pinot noir. I'm also partial to a cool glass of rosé on a hot summer day.

**An unforgettable book you received as a gift during childhood.**

We didn't receive books as gifts very often, although my parents introduced me to the library at a young age. I remember being particularly fond of Pokey the Flying Rabbit books.

**A memorable family vacation with your children.**

I had never seen a palm tree, and we decided to take a road trip to Georgia when my daughters were in grade school. I'd quit my teaching job to be a stay-at-home mom, and my husband was working fulltime and weekends to keep us afloat, so this trip was a big adventure. We got a hotel room on Jekyll Island and one day took a boat ride through the Okefenokee Swamp. On the way home, we spent a few days in Charleston, staying in what was once a brothel in the heart of downtown. We packed a lot into that week, and I got my fill of palm trees.

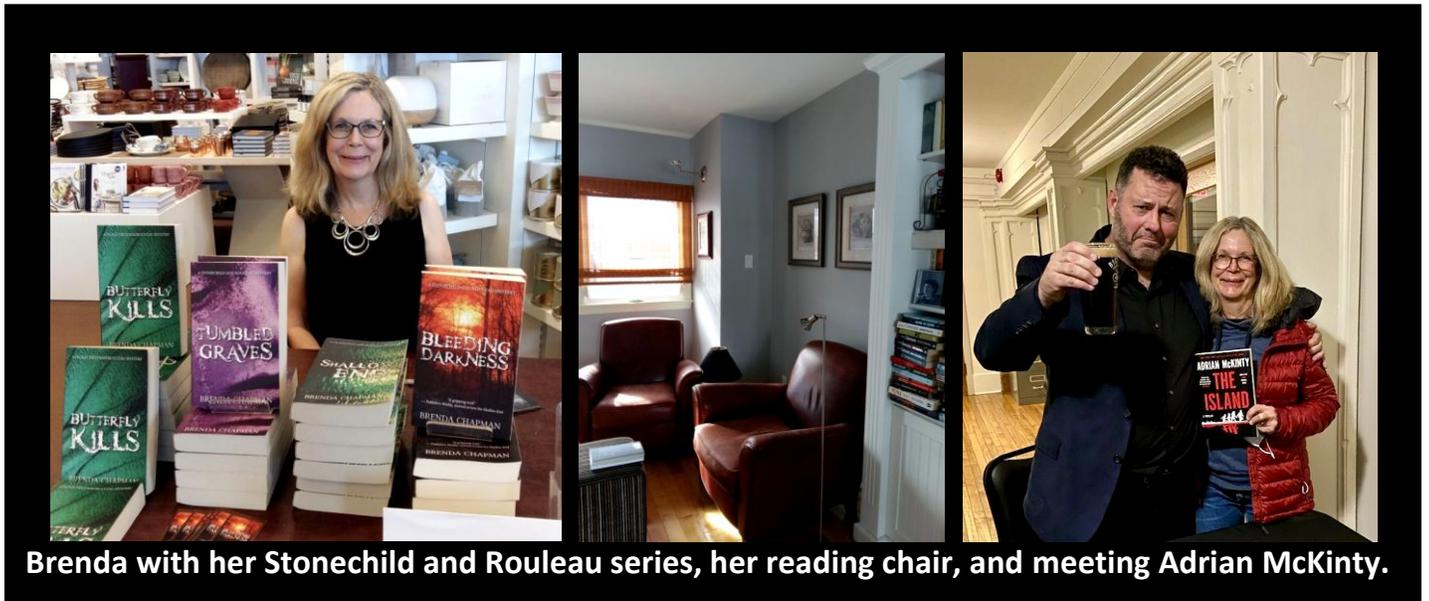
## Your favourite Ottawa landmark.

I have several, but I love my Westboro neighbourhood that includes a beautiful bit of forest called Hampton Park. The Rideau Canal and Experimental Farm are also places I love to visit.

## An unexpected and thrilling moment you experienced while attending a writer/publishing conference.

A number of years ago, I was trying to locate the green room before my panel in Monterey when a woman asked for my help silencing her phone. At the time, I only used a Blackberry, so we poured over her screen for a few moments and had a few chuckles since neither of us could figure it out. Turned out her name was Sue Grafton and she was about to be interviewed on stage in front of a crowded roomful of fans. She was funny and charming, and I'm so grateful we shared that moment.

Brenda Chapman website: <https://brendachapman.ca>  
Dundurn Press: <https://dundurn.com>



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