

*** Published by Winona Kent**—Crime Writers of Canada 2022 Vice Chair and BC/Yukon Representative—in her CWC Regional Newsletter, December 2022 edition.



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

In the mid-1960s, he was an aspiring musician following his passion as an alto saxophonist reading orchestration charts ranging from Ludwig van Beethoven and John Philip Sousa to 1920s ragtime and the 1940s arrangements of The Glenn Miller Orchestra.

This month he interviews Vancouver historical mystery author and podcaster Sarah M Stephen.

“I loved answering Bob Harris’ questions. They reflect the time that he puts into preparing for each interview and demonstrate his love of mystery and books”.

Sarah M Stephen

*** Bob Harris, CWC Associate, in conversation with Sarah M Stephen:**

Your historical crime mystery series *Journal Through Time* debuted with *The Dead of False Creek* in October 2021. You followed up with *The Hanging at the Hollow Tree* in 2022 and launched the *Clued in Mystery* podcast in February. And, before you became a published novelist, you enrolled in The Writers Studio at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University.

I would like to begin our chat today, Sarah, with your recollection of the year you spent in SFU's creative writing program and where it led you.

My year at the Writer’s Studio was a powerful one for me. I met some wonderful authors, learned how to give and receive feedback, and gained confidence in my own writing. I became a parent towards the end of the program, which put my writing on hold for a while though.

What attracts you to historical fiction as a reader and writer?

I have always loved reading historical fiction. One of the first “adult” books I remember reading was *Roots* and I loved how it so powerfully brought me to another time and place. Throw in mystery in a historical setting and I’m hooked.

Turning to your *Journal Through Time* mystery series -- what is the premise and what inspired it? Describe the setting and lifestyle of your two main characters.

The series is set in Vancouver in the late 19th century and present day. The main characters—a detective in the early Vancouver police force and an archivist working today—solve cases together by communicating through a journal that was originally kept by the detective.

There is something magical about an object that connects us to the past, and the idea of an object providing a tangible connection to the past is one of the things that inspired my series.

Both novels contain dual timelines and crisp dialogue of late 1800's police culture contrasted by the casual dialogue of 2017 Vancouver young folk. Your writing style shifts so easily between the two while keeping the story moving with unexpected twists, turns and clever reveals. What is the key to achieving such transitions in historical crime fiction?

Thank you for your kind words! When I’m working on a scene from the detective’s point of view, I often try to read some original source material before I start writing. For example, there are copies of Vancouver city council meetings that someone has painstakingly digitized. Not only are they the source of ideas to weave into the stories, they help me ground myself in the time. That said, I’m not a historian and I’m sure I get things wrong (and I have adjusted a detail or two to suit the story; it’s fiction, after all!).

When I’m writing in present day, I draw from snippets of conversation I hear around me. And living in the same period as those characters helps, even though I’m a little older than my character Riley Finch.

How did the series title emerge and the title choices formulate for Book 1 (*The Dead of False Creek*) and Book 2 (*The Hanging at the Hollow Tree*)?

The titles are the result of brainstorming with my editor. The working title of the first book was *The Journal*, but that didn't do a great job of conveying the genre, so I went back and forth with my editor a lot on that one. When we landed on *The Dead of False Creek*, the title of the next books came much more easily.

Please describe the research involved for each book. What aspects were most challenging?

Let me start by saying that I am not a historian. That said, I've been fortunate to have access to some useful resources. I have spent a lot of time looking at photos of early Vancouver on the city's online archives, spent time at the Vancouver Police Museum, and read through much of the notes made by Major Matthews, the city's first archivist, as well as a few books about the city's early days. However, I have changed details (the museum the archivist works at is fictional, for example) to suit the story and I'm sure I've made mistakes, so my books shouldn't be viewed as textbooks or reference manuals.

How long did *The Dead of False Creek* take to complete from concept to final sign-off by your editor?

This process was a long one. The germ of the story came in early 2014, when I was taking a short "intro to fiction" course through Simon Fraser University Continuing Studies. I started working on the first draft on my Seabus commute, so by the end of the year I had about 50,000 words.

I workshopped the first part of that manuscript in 2015 at The Writer's Studio, then my son was born, which put writing on hold for about three years. When he turned three, I was ready to pick it up again and I adjusted my work schedule so I had Fridays off, which gives me time to write. I revised the manuscript in the first part of 2019 (and drafted a couple of other books as well). I was so excited for 2020.

Until the pandemic threw everything off.

In the latter part of 2020, I started working on the book again and sent it to my editor. We went back and forth through the first part of 2021, and the book came out in the autumn of that year.

I would like to spend a few moments on your writing routine. How do you approach a project? What is key in planning it and keeping organized during your research and writing?

When I'm drafting, I start by making a few notes about how the murder will take place. Then I start writing and figuring out why and who is behind it. I don't do much more than that in terms of planning.

For my research, I keep track of notes using OneNote and scene developments using Excel.

Your third book in the *Journal Through Time* series is now placed with your editor. Can you give me a short overview?

Murder in Mount Pleasant involves missing jewelry, social media influencers, and of course, murder.

What would you say makes your two main characters unforgettable and keeps your readers loyal to the series?

I've had readers tell me that they love the concept and the partnership the main characters are developing despite living over a century apart.

Do you write other genres?

Because I have a new reader in my household, I have ideas for a few children's stories/stories for early readers. I love reading YA mystery and domestic thrillers, but haven't explored writing either of those yet.

Reflecting on your path as a commercial fiction novelist, who and what are your influences and why? Past and present. Are there mentors?

I've come to realize that there are so many paths to becoming an author, and the path you start on doesn't have to be the only one you follow. It took me a while to gain the confidence to share my writing with people (and honestly, most of the people I work with for my day job have no idea I write so I still have a bit of work to do on that front).

I have a lot of respect for anyone who writes, especially if they write in multiple genres, whether under the mystery umbrella or in completely unrelated spaces. In terms of specific influences, I am inspired by Agatha Christie and Anthony Horowitz for their capacity to write so many wonderful mysteries across different sub-genres, Louise Penny for the depth of her characters, and Iona Wishaw for how she incorporates place into her mysteries.

And I'm not sure if he knows this, but my husband inspired me to take the fiction class from which the germ of my series came. He was pursuing graduate studies at the time and so passionate about what he was studying. I wanted to embrace my passion with the same enthusiasm.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how and purpose).

I miss the pre-parenthood days of starting the day with a cup of tea and book and reading uninterrupted for hours. I dream of some point returning to that. For now, I listen to a lot of audio books, which allows me to enjoy a story while doing the dishes or while out for a run. I know some people don't consider that reading, but I find I retain details better when I listen to books. I also always have a paperback and an e-book on the go. I tend to read paperbacks before falling asleep and I turn to e-books if I wake in the middle of the night.

I also cherish the moments I spend reading to my son.

Moving on to the *Clued in Mystery* podcast -- which I discovered contains a treasure trove of fascinating content and interviews -- each weekly episode opens with the irresistible sound of a descending music riff played on a stand-up bass. Talk about a hook! So, Sarah, please give me your elevator pitch of *Clued in Mystery's* scope?

Thank you for your kind words about *Clued in Mystery*! It has been such a joy to put it together. In it, Brook Peterson and I explore the many different types of mysteries that audiences enjoy.

What motivated you to become a podcaster and co-host it with your American friend Brook Peterson?

I wanted to accomplish a couple of things with the podcast. First, I wanted to dive a little deeper into the genre that I love, starting by learning about early pioneers such as Wilkie Collins, Anna Katharine Green, Edgar Allan Poe, and the Detection Club. Brook and I really have only scratched the surface there, so no doubt we will return to some of them.

We have also explored different types of mysteries and sub-genres (noir, spy, cozy, etc). More recently, we've looked at different tropes, for example, when an author is the sleuth.

I wanted to work with Brook on this because I respect her as an author and I was thrilled when she agreed. There is no shortage of things for us to discuss about mystery!

I think mystery is the core of all fiction, whether it's *why* two faery clans are fighting in high fantasy, *how* two characters will fall in love in romance, or *whodunnit* of classic mystery fiction. As a genre, it is often viewed as formulaic or too commercial, but—and this is especially true in recent years—it is multi-layered and nuanced, and I wanted a space to explore that (and also to have an excuse to talk about mystery with another mystery fan).

Can you give me a brief summary of how you and Brook plan your weekly programming and are able to deliver such interesting conversations so smoothly? Did you take training for podcasting or broadcasting?

Brook and I try to plan out a season in advance, though we don't have a strict definition of how long a season runs. Typically, we each do a little research on the episode theme and one of us opens the episode with a summary of the research we've done. Sometimes we interview another author or a mystery expert, which is always fun. I think my favourite episodes though have been the "What would you do" episodes where we discuss a book from the point of view of the main character. We have a few different episode types to choose from, which keeps us engaged, and I hope it does the same for listeners.

With respect to the technical aspects, neither of us has broadcasting or podcasting training, but we've been learning as much as we can. I really enjoy how quickly podcasting allows us to create. Often only a couple of weeks elapse between recording and releasing an episode, which is much shorter than a book release schedule.

If you were tasked with having three deceased pioneers of mystery genre appear together with you and Brook on a podcast panel, who would you choose? Why?

I love this question and it's a hard one to answer because I would love to do a series of episodes with so many pioneers of the genre. If I'm forced to pick three, I would invite Anna Katherine Green as one of the first female mystery authors (and someone who is often overlooked), Dorothy L. Sayers because I love her style, and of course, Agatha Christie because of the long-lasting influence she continues to have on the genre. So many of the conversations that Brook and I have come back to Agatha Christie.

How has podcasting and membership in Crime Writers of Canada benefitted you as an author?

My favourite thing about being a member of the Crime Writers of Canada is the connections I've with other local writers. It has been wonderful to meet and support them at book launches and events and I hope to build on this in the future. I leave every event filled with excitement about being an author and a member of this community.

Podcasting has also helped me connect with other writers and mystery fans, but from around the world.

With focus toward your current writing, podcast projects and research, what and who in mystery genre has captured your attention in print, radio, television, film and online?

I admire Anthony Horowitz for the many mystery spaces he writes in and how masterfully he does it. He is a dream podcast guest for me!

What keeps you writing?

I write because I love it, and putting new words down on paper brings me energy. I also write because when I became a parent, I wanted to be able to say to my son that I had a dream and I pursued it.

Thank you for today's chat, Sarah. I've enjoyed reading your *Journal Through Time* series and listening to *Clued in Mystery* podcasts.

To wrap up, here are five items you could give me flash answers to:

Your favourite beverage:

Rooibos tea with milk and honey.

A food item you like to bake:

Cookies. There are always cookies at my house.

The most memorable book gifted to you:

And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie.

Your favourite Vancouver historical landmark:

I love the Vancouver Police Museum. It's located in the former city morgue, coroner's court, and coroner's office. If those walls could talk!

An unexpected, thrilling moment from podcasting:

Realizing that other people are actually listening to the conversations that Brook and I are having.

Thank you so much for this opportunity, Bob. I've really enjoyed answering your questions.

Sarah M Stephen website: <https://sarahmstephen.ca/>

Clued in Mystery podcast website: <http://cluedinmystery.com/>



Sarah appeared at the Vancouver WORD Festival in September 2022 with CWC authors Rick Alexander Jr., A.J. Devlin, Marion Crook, and Vice Chair and BC/Yukon Rep Winona Kent.

Writing professionally as Robert H. Harris and working as a consultant to writers, Bob Harris accepts email inquiries at: harrisbobh@hotmail.com (Profile and publicity photos available on request).