

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie

by Alan Bradley

About the Book

It is the summer of 1950—and at the once-grand mansion of Buckshaw, young Flavia de Luce, an aspiring chemist with a passion for poison, is intrigued by a series of inexplicable events: A dead bird is found on the doorstep, a postage stamp bizarrely pinned to its beak. Then, hours later, Flavia finds a man lying in the cucumber patch and watches him as he takes his dying breath.

For Flavia, who is both appalled and delighted, life begins in earnest when murder comes to Buckshaw. “I wish I could say I was afraid, but I wasn’t. Quite the contrary. This was by far the most interesting thing that had ever happened to me in my entire life.”

Praise for the Book

“Brilliant, irresistible and incorrigible, Flavia has a long future ahead of her...Bradley’s mystery debut is a standout.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

“Fun for the reader.... Fans of Louise Fitzhugh's iconic Harriet the Spy will welcome 11-year-old sleuth Flavia de Luce, the heroine of ... Bradley's rollicking debut.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Amazingly entertaining...The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie introduces a charming and engaging sleuth.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

“A fresh, engaging first novel.”

—*Library Journal*

Courtesy of Random House

About the Author

Title: Alan Bradley

Canadian Novelist (1938 -)

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Document Type: Biography

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Updated:03/24/2011

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born October 10, 1938, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada; married; wife's name Shirley. Memberships: Saskatoon Writers (first president), Saskatchewan Writers Guild (founding member), Casebook of Saskatoon (founding member). Addresses: Home: Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. E-mail: info@flaviadeluce.com.

CAREER:

Worked at various radio and television stations in Ontario, Canada, and at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute (now Ryerson University), Toronto, Ontario; University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, director of television engineering in media center, and teacher of scriptwriting and television production courses, c. 1969-94; writer.

AWARDS:

Saskatchewan Writers Guild Award for Children's Literature for short story "Meet Miss Mullen"; Debut Dagger Award, British Crimewriter's Association, for *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- (With William A.S. Sarjeant) *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street: The Truth about Sherlock* (literary criticism), 2nd edition, University of Alberta Press (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada), 2004.
- *The Shoebox Bible* (memoir), McClelland & Stewart (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2006.

- *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* (mystery), Delacorte Press (New York, NY), 2009.
- *A Red Herring Without Mustard* (novel), Delacorte (New York, NY), 2011.

Author of short stories for literary journals and for CBC Radio. Contributor to periodicals, including the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and *National Post*.

Sidelights

Alan Bradley had a long career in broadcasting before he retired to pursue his ambition to be a writer. His first book was a nonfiction study of the "Sherlock Holmes" detective stories written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street: The Truth about Sherlock*. Written with William A.S. Sarjeant, the book put forth the controversial notion that the famous fictional detective was actually a woman. Before writing it, the two authors read every Sherlock Holmes story written, and worked on the book for ten years before submitting it for publication. In it, they point out that many of Holmes's unique traits were those usually considered feminine in nature. They backed their theory with details from the life of Conan Doyle; his dearest friends were all female, and the authors contend that the fictional creation of Holmes was pieced together from various aspects of these friends. The book proved controversial, and the authors were publicly attacked for it, on at least one occasion. Writing in *Reviewer's Bookwatch*, Margaret Lane called *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street* "thoughtful and thought provoking."

In 2006, Bradley published *The Shoebox Bible*, a memoir that takes its name from a discovery the author made as a boy, during World War II. Well hidden in his mother's closet, he found an old shoebox, full of strange odds and ends, including cigarette packages, calendar pages, and paper bags. On these objects, his mother had written out Bible verses, seemingly unrelated. The boy didn't understand the meaning of it all, but he did know that the box had something to do with his father's abandonment of the family. In his mind, he began calling the box the "shoebox Bible." It wasn't until years later, when his mother was dying, that he once again saw the box, and at that time his mother explained its significance to him. The book relates the family's story and how they managed to maintain a loving atmosphere even in the aftermath of abandonment.

In 2009, Bradley published the first in a series of books featuring an eleven-year-old detective, Flavia de Luce. Bradley recalled in an interview published on the Web site *Material Witness* that he was working on a completely different book, concerning a female broadcaster during the 1950s, when Flavia made her first appearance. "Like Athena, who sprang fully formed and fully armed from the brow of Zeus, Flavia simply appeared," he said. "She walked onto the page of another book I was writing, and simply hijacked the story. I had no idea who she was or where she came from, and because of that, I resisted her. It took Flavia a while to make me shut up and listen." Although he was already a few chapters into his original book project, Bradley eventually discarded it in order to focus on a new story involving Flavia, which was eventually published as *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.

The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie is set in England, a country the author had never visited until after the book's publication. His evocation of England was based on books he read, and on his grandparents' memories of their life there. In the story, Flavia de Luce is eleven years old and brilliant. She has two older sisters, Ophelia and Daphne, and a father who seems more concerned with stamp-collecting than he is with his daughters. Left to their own purposes, the girls all learn to pursue their passions, which in Flavia's case means the study of chemistry, and in particular, the study of poisons. The mystery begins to unfold when a dead bird is left on the doorstep of the family home, with a rare stamp impaled on its beak. After a murder is committed, Flavia begins her own investigation of the matter, riding her bicycle into town to talk with villagers and visit the library, to do research on her theories about the crime. Eventually, she learns that the murder may be connected to her father and his involvement in the suicide, years before, of one of his teachers. According to Kirstin Merrihew, a contributor to the *Mostly Fiction* Web site, the story is "a positively delightful romp," full of well-developed characters. Flavia herself, while presented as a very precocious child, is also shown to be "unschooled about many aspects of human nature," something that "endears Flavia all the more as a character."

Flavia was described by Julia Holmes in a review for *Entertainment Weekly* as "scheming, fearless, and brilliant." Holmes also praised the author for creating a story that is clever and entertaining, yet also portrays "the darker realities of this rustic English paradise," still struggling to recover from the traumas of World War II. Reviewer Judy Coon commented in *Booklist* that the only people who might dislike *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* are those who do not like "precocious young heroines with extraordinary vocabulary and audacious courage."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Bradley, Alan, *The Shoebox Bible*, McClelland & Stewart (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), 2006.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 1, 2009, Judy Coon, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, p. 35.
- *Canadian Book Review Annual*, January 1, 2004, Trevor S. Raymond, review of *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street: The Truth about Sherlock*, p. 266; January 1, 2006, Janet Arnett, review of *The Shoebox Bible*, p. 32.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, May 15, 2009, Julia Holmes, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, p. 60.
- *Journal of Popular Culture*, February 1, 2006, Fred Isaac, review of *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street*, p. 169.

- *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 2009, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.
- *Library Journal*, April 15, 2009, Michele Leber, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, p. 89.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 2, 2009, Matthew Thornton, "Bantam Takes Series," p. 6; February 23, 2009, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, p. 38.
- *Reviewer's Bookwatch*, October 1, 2004, Margaret Lane, review of *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street*.
- *School Library Journal*, May 1, 2009, Francisca Goldsmith, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, p. 140.

ONLINE

- *Abe Books*, <http://www.abebooks.com/> (October 24, 2009), biographical information about Alan Bradley.
- *Bookpage*, <http://www.bookpage.com/> (October 24, 2009), Arlene McKanic, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.
- *Fantastic Fiction*, <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/> (October 24, 2009), biographical information about Alan Bradley.
- *Flavia Deluce Web site*, <http://www.flaviadeluce.com> (October 24, 2009).
- *Genre Go Round Reviews*, <http://genregoroundreviews.blogspot.com/> (April 16, 2009), Harriet Klausner, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.
- *January Online*, <http://januarmagazine.com/> (February 11, 2009), Linda L. Richards, interview with Alan Bradley.
- *Les's Book Critiques*, <http://lesasbookcritiques.blogspot.com/> (June 5, 2009), biographical information about Alan Bradley.
- *Material Witness*, <http://www.materialwitness.typepad.com/> (December 22, 2008), interview with Alan Bradley.
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://bookreview.mostlyfiction.com/> (April 28, 2009), Kirstin Merrihew, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.
- *Random House Web site*, <http://www.randomhouse.com/> (October 24, 2009), biographical information about Alan Bradley.
- *Sun-Sentinel Online*, <http://weblogs.sun-sentinel.com/> (June 21, 2009), Oline Cogdill, review of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*. *

Source Citation

"Alan Bradley." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 19 Jan. 2012.

Document URL

http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000193742&v=2.1&u=lom_kentdl&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|H1000193742

Author Interview

A Conversation with Alan Bradley
Courtesy of Random House

Random House: With the publication of *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, you've become a 70-year-old-first time novelist. Have you always had a passion for writing—or is it more of a recent development?

Alan Bradley: Well, the Roman author Seneca once said something like this: "Hang on to your youthful enthusiasms – you'll be able to use them better when you're older." So to put it briefly, I'm taking his advice.

I actually spent most of my life working on the technical side of television production, but would like to think that I've always been a writer. I started writing a novel at age five, and have written articles for various publications all my life. It wasn't until my early retirement, though, that I started writing books. I published my memoir, *The Shoebox Bible*, in 2004, and then started working on a mystery about a reporter in England. It was during the writing of this story that I stumbled across Flavia de Luce, the main character in *Sweetness*.

Random House: Flavia certainly is an interesting character. How did you come up with such a forceful, precocious and entertaining personality?

Alan Bradley: Flavia walked onto the page of another book I was writing, and simply hijacked the story. I was actually well into this other book - about three or four chapters - and as I introduced a main character, a detective, there was a point where he was required to go to a country house and interview this colonel.

I got him up to the driveway and there was this girl sitting on a camp stool doing something with a notebook and a pencil and he stopped and asked her what she was doing and she said "writing down license number plates" and he said "well there can't be many in such a place" and she said, "well I have yours, don't I? " I came to a stop. I had no idea who this girl was and where she came from.

She just materialized. I can't take any credit for Flavia at all. I've never had a character who came that much to life. I've had characters that tend to tell you what to do, but Flavia grabbed the controls on page one. She sprung full-blown with all of her attributes – her passion for poison, her father and his history – all in one package. It surprised me.

Random House: There aren't many adult books that feature child narrators. Why did you want Flavia to be the voice of this novel?

Alan Bradley: People probably wonder, "What's a 70-year-old-man doing writing about an 11-year-old-girl in 1950's England?" And it's a fair question. To me, Flavia embodies that kind of hotly burning flame of our young years: that time of our lives when we're just starting out, when anything – absolutely anything! – is within our capabilities.

I think the reason that she manifested herself as a young girl is that I realized that it would really be a lot of fun to have somebody who was virtually invisible in a village. And of course, we don't listen to what children say—they're always asking questions, and nobody pays the slightest attention or thinks for a minute that they're going to do anything with the information that they let slip. I wanted Flavia to take great advantage of that. I was also intrigued by the possibilities of dealing with an unreliable narrator; one whose motives were not always on the up-and-up.

She is an amalgam of burning enthusiasm, curiosity, energy, youthful idealism, and frightening fearlessness. She's also a very real menace to anyone who thwarts her, but fortunately, they don't generally realize it.

Random House: Like Flavia, you were also 11 years old in 1950. Is there anything autobiographical about her character?

Alan Bradley: A: Somebody pointed out the fact that both Flavia and I lacked a parent. But I wasn't aware of this connection during the writing of the book. It simply didn't cross my mind. It is true that I grew up in a home with only one parent, and I was allowed to run pretty well free, to do the kinds of things I wanted. And I did have extremely intense interests then—things that you get focused on. When you're that age, you sometimes have a great enthusiasm that is very deep and very narrow, and that is something that has always intrigued me—that world of the 11-year-old that is so quickly lost.

Random House: Your story evokes such a vivid setting. Had you spent much time in the British countryside before writing this book?

Alan Bradley: My first trip to England didn't come until I went to London to receive the 2007 Debut Dagger Award, so I had never even stepped foot in the country at the time of writing *Sweetness*. But I have always loved England. My mother was born there. And I've always felt I grew up in a very English household. I had always wanted to go and had dreamed for many years of doing so.

When I finally made it there, the England that I was seeing with my eyes was quite unlike the England I had imagined, and yet it was the same. I realized that the differences were precisely those differences between real life, and the simulation of real life, that we create in our detective novels. So this was an opportunity to create on the page this England that had been in my head my whole life.

Random House: You have five more books lined up in this series, all coming from Delacorte Press. Will Flavia age as the series goes on?

Alan Bradley: A bit, not very much. I think she's going to remain in the same age bracket. I don't really like the idea of Flavia as an older teenager. At her current age, she is such a concoction of contradictions. It's one of the things that I very much love about her. She's eleven but she has the wisdom of an adult. She knows everything about chemistry but nothing about family relationships.

I don't think she'd be the same person if she were a few years older. She certainly wouldn't have access to the drawing rooms of the village.

Random House: Do you have a sense of what the next books in the series will be about?

Alan Bradley: The second book, *The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag*, is finished, and I'm working on the third book. I have a general idea of what's happening in each one of the books, because I wanted to focus on some bygone aspect of British life that was still there in the '50s but has now vanished. So we have postage stamps in the first one.... The second book is about the travelling puppet shows on the village green. And one of them is about filmmaking—it sort of harks back to the days of the classic Ealing comedies with Alec Guinness and so forth.

Random House: Not every author garners such immediate success with a first novel. After only completing 15 pages of *Sweetness*, you won the Dagger award and within 8 days had secured book deals in 3 countries. You've since secured 19 countries. Enthusiasm continues to grow from every angle. How does it feel?

Alan Bradley: It's like being in the glow of a fire. You hope you won't get burned. I'm not sure how much I've realized it yet. I guess I can say I'm "almost overwhelmed"—I'm not quite overwhelmed, but I'm getting there. Every day has something new happening, and communications pouring in from people all over. The book has been receiving wonderful reviews and touching people. But Flavia has been touching something in people that generates a response from the heart, and the most often mentioned word in the reviews is love—how much people love Flavia and have taken her in as if she's a long-lost member of their family, which is certainly very, very gratifying.

Courtesy of Random House

Discussion Questions

1. With her high level of knowledge, her erudition and her self-reliance, Flavia hardly seems your typical eleven-year-old girl. Or does she? Discuss Flavia and her personality, and how her character drives this novel. Can you think of other books that have used a similar protagonist?
2. *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie* falls within the tradition of English country house mysteries, but with the devilishly intelligent Flavia racing around Bishop's Lacey on her bike instead of the expected older woman ferreting out the truth by chatting with her fellow villagers. Discuss how Bradley uses the traditions of the genre, and how he plays with them too.
3. What is your favorite scene from *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*?
4. With her excessive interest in poisons and revenge, it's no surprise that Flavia is fascinated, not scared, as she watches the stranger die in her garden. In your view, is her dark matter-of-factness more refreshing or disturbing?
5. Flavia reminds us often about Harriet, the mother she never knew, and has many keepsakes that help her imagine what she was like. Do you think the real Harriet would have fit into Flavia's mold?
6. Flavia's distance from her father, the Colonel, is obvious, yet she loves him all the same. Does their relationship change over the course of the novel in a lasting way? Would Flavia want it to?
7. Through Flavia's eyes what sort of a picture does Alan Bradley paint of the British aristocracy? Think as well about how appearances aren't always reality, as with the borderline bankruptcy of Flavia's father and Dr. Kissing.
8. Discuss the meaning (or meanings) of the title *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*.
9. What twists in the plot surprised you the most?
10. Buckshaw, the estate, is almost a character in its own right here, with its overlarge wings, hidden laboratory, and pinched front gates. Talk about how Bradley brings the setting to life in this novel – not only Buckshaw itself, but Bishop's Lacey and the surrounding area.
11. What does Flavia care about most in life? How do the people around her compare to her chemistry lab and books?

12. Like any scientist, Flavia expects her world to obey certain rules, and seems to be thrown off kilter when surprises occur. How much does she rely on the predictability of those around her, like her father and her sisters, in order to pursue her own interests (like solving the murder)?

Courtesy of Random House