

The Tenderness of Wolves

by Stef Penney

About the Book

The year is 1867. Winter has just tightened its grip on Dove River, a tiny isolated settlement in the Northern Territory, when a man is brutally murdered. Laurent Jammett had been a voyageur for the Hudson Bay Company before an accident lamed him four years earlier. The same accident afforded him the little parcel of land in Dove River, land that the locals called unlucky due to the untimely death of the previous owner.

A local woman, Mrs. Ross, stumbles upon the crime scene and sees the tracks leading from the dead man's cabin north toward the forest and the tundra beyond. It is Mrs. Ross's knock on the door of the largest house in Caulfield that launches the investigation. Within hours she will regret that knock with a mother's love -- for soon she makes another discovery: her seventeen-year-old son Francis has disappeared and is now considered a prime suspect.

In the wake of such violence, people are drawn to the crime and to the township -- Andrew Knox, Dove River's elder statesman; Thomas Sturrock, a wily American itinerant trader; Donald Moody, the clumsy young Company representative; William Parker, a half-breed Native American and trapper who was briefly detained for Jammett's murder before becoming Mrs. Ross's guide. But the question remains: do these men want to solve the crime or exploit it?

One by one, the searchers set out from Dove River following the tracks across a desolate landscape -- home to only wild animals, madmen, and fugitives -- variously seeking a murderer, a son, two sisters missing for seventeen years, and a forgotten Native American culture before the snows settle and cover the tracks of the past for good.

Praise for the Book

Think *Cold Mountain*—only colder: Instead of the South, the setting here is Canada in the late fall of 1867. Like Charles Frazier's novel, Penney's stirring saga hinges on a plucky woman's search for a loved one... where Penney's vivid main characters gain insight into the nature of love and responsibility. Mystery, romance and really bad weather—just try putting this one down.

— *People*

Plot summary cannot do justice to this complex and engrossing tale of human passion and folly...Highly recommended

— *Library Journal*

Courtesy of Simon Schuster

About the Author

Title: Stef Penney

British Writer (1969 -)

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Personal Information:

Born 1969, in Edinburgh, Scotland. Education: Graduate of Bristol University; studied film and TV in Bournemouth; participant in Carlton Television New Writers Scheme. Addresses: Home: London, England.

Career:

Writer, novelist, screenwriter, and filmmaker. Writer and director of two short films and programs for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and British Film Council.

Awards:

Costa Award for Best First Novel and Costa Book of the Year Award (formerly Whitbread Prize), both 2007, both for *The Tenderness of Wolves*.

Works:

Writings:

- *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2007.

Author of screenplay for *The Seed*, adaptation of Davide de Angelis novel; writer and director of *The Knowledge*, produced and distributed by the British Film Council; writer and director of *You Drive Me*, for British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); writer and director of *The Messenger*, BPCAD/Kelso Films; writer and director of *The Baker's Tale*, BPCAD; writer, *Lune*, BPCAD; and adaptor and screenwriter, *El Amor Oculto*, BPCAD.

“Sidelights”

Stef Penney is a Scottish writer, screenwriter, and filmmaker based in London, England. After earning a degree in philosophy and theology at Bristol University, Penney took up filmmaking. She has written and directed several short films, and has created works for the BBC and the British Film Council.

Penney is also a novelist, and her debut work, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, garnered considerable critical and commercial attention, both for Penney and her original British publisher, Quercus. Set in the vast winter lands of Canada, the novel concerns a murder mystery on the rugged open frontier. The book was awarded the 2007 Costa Award (formerly the Whitbread Prize) for Best First Novel, as well as the Costa Award for Novel of the Year. Anthony Cheetham, chairman of Quercus, noted in the *Bookseller* that the novel's success would raise the publisher's profile considerably. The effects for Penney would also be profound, he said. "Literary prizes are not really that important-- unless you have the good fortune to be on the receiving end," Cheetham mused. "For Stef Penney, the Costa is a triumph and an ordeal: the price of success is that a very private persona has now slipped, unmasked, into the public domain." An important element of that persona adds to the remarkable story of this debut novel: during the research and writing of the work, Penny suffered from agoraphobia. She never traveled to Canada to observe and experience the harsh, winter-gripped landscape she evokes in her book. Her agoraphobia made such travel impossible. Instead, Penney researched her story entirely within the relatively secure confines of the British Library. Even so, her efforts resulted in a book that "takes your breath away because it comes so close to perfection," commented *Bookbag* reviewer Sue Magee.

The Tenderness of Wolves is set in the cold and bleak environs of Canada's northern territory in the nineteenth century. Winter is approaching the small town of Dove River, threatening to bring dangerous cold and potentially lethal snowfall to an already treacherous landscape. As the novel opens, the protagonist, known only as Mrs. Ross, discovers the body of fur trapper Laurent Jammet, scalped and with his throat cut. Soon, the town authorities have gathered to investigate the murder, bringing in Hudson Bay representative Donald Moody to help out. Tellingly, Mrs. Ross's seventeen-year-old foster son, Francis, an Irish orphan she and her husband took in when he was five, disappears the same day that Jammet's murder is discovered. Francis was known to visit Jammet frequently, and his abrupt disappearance brings down great suspicion on him. Two sets of footprints in the snow lead away from Jammet's cabin, one set is believed to be Francis's. As the investigation unfolds, it hearkens back to another mystery from years before, when three girls went out on a picnic and only one returned.

The murder brings other newcomers to Dove River, including Thomas Sturrock, an elderly attorney who is in search of an ancient fragment of bone once owned by Jammet and which bears on its surface important historical etchings. A new suspect in the murder emerges when half-Indian trapper William Parker, who frequently traded with Jammet, is discovered searching the dead man's cabin. Through it all, Mrs. Ross is determined to find out the truth about the murder and exonerate her son, and she and Parker head north

into the treacherous Canadian winter to find Francis and the answers that will prove his innocence. A distant Scandinavian settlement known as Himmelvanger will prove to be critical to all the novel's significant characters, even as their harrowing journey forges an unlikely bond between Parker and Mrs. Ross. The Canadian landscape and atmosphere is "so vividly drawn that I felt physically cold and terrified by the conditions the travelers faced," Magee remarked.

"This book wasn't written; it was crafted and in years to come it will be thought of as a classic," concluded Magee. Throughout the novel, commented *Library Journal* contributor Barbara Hoffert, "characters are distinctive, their portraits startling and incisive, and the writing is fluid and beautifully detailed." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic called the novel "a striking debut by a writer with tremendous command of language, setting, and voice." *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Jennifer Reese named it a "gripping, elegantly written, and uncommonly powerful debut."

Further Readings:

Further Readings About the author:

Periodicals

- *Bookseller*, February 16, 2007, "Hungry Like the Wolves: Stef Penney's Costa Winner Quadruples Sales and Has a New Edition on the Shelves," p. 17; February 16, 2007, Anthony Cheetham, "Prize Winners: Quercus' Stef Penney Won the Costa Book of the Year. Anthony Cheetham Tells How It Moves His Company from the Margins to the Mainstream," p. 24; February 23, 2007, "Recently Awarded," p. 41.
- *Books in Canada*, November, 2006, Nancy Wigston, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*, p. 36.
- *Bulletin with Newsweek*, December 19, 2006, Robin Wallace-Crabbe, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*, p. 161.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, July 13, 2007, Jennifer Reese, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*, p. 74.
- *Guardian* (London, England), February 8, 2007, Mark Brown, "Agrophobic Tells of Her Struggle to Win Book Prize," profile of Stef Penney.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, May 15, 2007, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*.
- *Library Journal*, May 1, 2007, Barbara Hoffert, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*, p. 74.
- *M2 Best Books*, February 8, 2007, "Stef Penney Wins Costa Book of the Year Award."
- *Publishers Weekly*, May 28, 2007, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*, p. 37.

Online

- *Bookbag*, <http://www.thebookbag.co.uk/> (February 4, 2008), Sue Magee, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*.
- *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Web site*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/> (February 8, 2007), "Debut Novelist Wins Costa Award," profile of Stef Penney.
- *Dovegreyreader Scribbles Web log*, <http://dovegreyreader.typepad.com/> (March 7, 2007), review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*.
- *MBA Literary Agents Unlimited Web site*, <http://www.mbalit.co.uk/> (February 4, 2008), biography of Stef Penney.
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (July 10, 2007), Poornima Apte, review of *The Tenderness of Wolves*.*

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Discussion Questions

1. The novel is divided into four parts: Disappearance, The Fields of Heaven, The Winter Partners, and The Sickness of Long Thinking. Characterize each of these parts by what occurs within them and discuss why you think the author chose this format.
2. The people of Dove River are mostly settlers from foreign countries who have a very particular worldview rooted in their own struggle for survival. In what ways are the children in this book reflections of their parents? In what ways have they broken from their parents' examples? Does this lead to joy or sorrow? Give examples.
3. Living so rustically in such a closed society has given rise to a very particular set of rules in Dove River, such as the expectation that neighbors will make return offerings in kind when they've borrowed something. What other rules of survival - either literally or socially -- are presented in this novel?
4. Francis is introduced as a mystery from his first day in Dove River: He arrives dressed as a girl for unknown reasons. Did you suspect that his relationship with Jammet was more than a friendship? Why or why not?
5. *The Tenderness of Wolves* is a story told from the perspective of several different characters, but Mrs. Ross's sections are the only ones written in first person. What effect does this have on your reading experience? Why do you think the author does this?
6. Mrs. Ross is always referred to formally as "Mrs. Ross," even by the narrator. What is the significance of this choice?
7. On page 154, Parker explains what the "sickness of long thinking" is to Mrs. Ross. Who in this story is suffering from the sickness of long thinking? Support your opinion with examples from the novel.
8. The author has been applauded for her ability to build suspense. Identify some of the clues she subtly drops along the way and explain how they either misdirected you or gave you hints toward solving the various mysteries of the novel.
9. Donald tries to elicit sympathy from Elizabeth for her father on page 338 by telling her, "It's only human to want an answer." Do you think this explanation satisfies her? Would it satisfy you? Why or why not? Who else in this novel is searching for answers? Does anyone find what they are looking for?
10. In contrast to most of the other relationships in this novel, Line and Espen seem to have a deep passion for one another. Were you surprised that he abandons her? Why or why not?

11. The women in this novel find themselves in situations of varying frustration and sorrow. Compare and contrast these characters: Susannah and Maria, Mrs. Ross, Ann Pretty, Line, and Elizabeth Bird. What do they have in common, and how are they different? Do you feel sympathy for any of them? Why or why not?
12. Explore the symbolism of Donald's spectacles and his near-sightedness. What does this symbol tell you about his character? What is it that he sees most clearly just before his death?
13. Do you think that Mrs. Ross really loves William Parker, or is it something else? What did you expect would happen to Mrs. Ross when she left with Parker to track down Francis?
14. The backdrop of Canada, still largely unsettled in the mid- to late 1800s, provides a hauntingly beautiful and frighteningly dangerous setting for the lives of these very different people. How does the wilderness change the characters in this novel?
15. What is the significance of the title, *The Tenderness of Wolves*? Relate it to the story and give examples to support your interpretation.

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster

Enhance Your Book Club Experience

1. Stef Penney is praised for her ability to create suspense and captivate her readers. She uses foreshadowing, a literary device that entails dropping subtle hints of what is to come throughout the novel. Sometimes these hints point to a plot twist, while others pull readers breathlessly through to the climax of the story. Draw a map of the clues dropped throughout *The Tenderness of Wolves* and identify what aspects of the plot they pointed to. For fun, have each member of your book club mark on the map the point at which they "figured it out."
2. The conflict between the Hudson Bay Company and free traders, as well as the eventual formation of competing companies, is at the heart of this novel. Get a flavor for this volatile situation by doing a little background research. You can start here: www.canadiana.org/hbc/intro_e.html.
3. After she burns her eyes from the glare off the frozen tundra, Mrs. Ross enjoys a piece of maple sugar -- a gift from her traveling companion, William Parker. Today, you can purchase a variety of maple candies, from maple cream -- filled chocolates to maple fudge to the traditional favorite, maple syrup. Try a taste yourself, or bring a box to your next book club meeting to share. You can purchase maple treats at most candy or gourmet food stores, such as www.vermontcountrystore.com.

Multimedia Presentation *Meet Stef Penney* can be viewed at:
<http://www.simonandschuster.com/multimedia?video=27802923001>

Courtesy of Simon and Schuster