

The Library Whisperer

Long ago, before malls existed, some cities had hallowed department stores downtown, and part my childhood memories include holding some adult's hand and standing in the cold in front of a magical Christmas scene. The brown paper had come down from Stewart's window in Rockford, Illinois, and dancing bears, skating ducks, frogs in costume fishing from little bridges close to a nearby village drew me in. Christmas had begun for me, and I was caught up in the wonderment of the season.

In the library we are all children again. Each of us has favorite sections in the library we love. I have some favorite things I'd like to share with you, and I'll start with a writer recommended to me by a friend. The author is Canadian Louise Penny, and I'd never heard of her. She has published about five traditional mystery novels, most of them winning serious awards. I've read them all, because she carries the characters and setting over from one book to the next. The setting is a village near Quebec City; the main character is Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, head of the homicide department of the Surete du Quebec. Murders are done by unconventional means and there are large casts of suspects, with clues hidden in plain sight. Her writing is wise and compassionate. I would like to move to Three Pines, Quebec, her bucolic village- even if the odd murder occurs now and then- but I could never find it on a map. *Still Life, A Fatal Grace, The Cruellest Month, A Rule Against Murder, The Brutal Telling, and Bury Your Dead*: all good, cozy reads by the fireside with or without a purring cat on your lap.

Another author, Allegra Goodman, has written an unusual novel with current themes, *The Cookbook Collector*. Two young adult sisters have managed to survive their mother's death and their father's remarriage. Both now on the west coast, one sister is the CEO of a dot.com start-up that became wildly successful, the other is a perennial philosophy student working part-time in an antique book shop owned by an interesting man who has come upon some very rare, old cookbooks. The older sister is a millionaire until the dot.com bubble bursts; the younger, a free spirited vegetarian tree hugger, afraid of heights. They each fall in love with totally different men, and things don't work out well for one of them. It is an engaging story of the '90's', not easily put down.

I loved a gardening book new to the collection, *Flowers: Chic and Cheap*, by Carlos Mota. This Venezuelan designer/writer encourages us to just bring flowers home from the supermarket or pick them from the backyard. For little or no money, he shows how to rearrange them into stunning displays for our home. The book is gorgeously photographed, and directions are simple and clear. You don't have to be a gardener to learn from Carlos Mota.

A final favorite is *Perfume: the Guide*, by Luca Turin and Tania Sanchez. It is all about the science of perfume, choosing perfume, wearing perfume, what the terms mean, and descriptive reviews from a man's point of view and also a woman's. The authors are ruthlessly entertaining, but their credentials are solid. Perfumes are actually rated, so based on their work in this nonfiction offering you can research what sounds good, make a list, and visit the perfume counter of your local department store. I did just that, and made a confident choice of one I absolutely love. I was thrilled when my husband bought me a bottle for my birthday! Remember, though, wearing a scent is tricky, and yours should never announce your presence before you are actually in the room. Still, a French woman wouldn't dream of leaving home without perfume on, and neither should we. It's just a feel-good thing to do for one's self.

If you really want to enjoy this holiday season, tone down the commercial aspects of it

and make a point to visit your library and become, for just a little while, a child again. Throw any blues right out the window. Immerse yourself in our carefully selected Christmas crafts section. Try one new decoration. Make, don't buy, a plate of old-fashioned Christmas cookies from one of our cookbooks.

Read some charming Christmas fiction. Listen to our wonderful carols on CD. Your family won't know what got into you, but we will. Shhh! Don't tell! You have found the Christmas spirit right here, and it didn't cost a thing.

Suzanne Smith is a Reference Librarian at Bartholomew County Public Library.