



The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie: A Flavia de Luce Mystery

By Alan Bradley

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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.”

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The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie: A Flavia de Luce Mystery By Alan Bradley Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Amazon Best of the Month, April 2009: It's the beginning of a lazy summer in 1950 at the sleepy English village of Bishop's Lacey. Up at the great house of Buckshaw, aspiring chemist Flavia de Luce passes the time tinkering in the laboratory she's inherited from her deceased mother and an eccentric great uncle. When Flavia discovers a murdered stranger in the cucumber patch outside her bedroom window early one morning, she decides to leave aside her flasks and Bunsen burners to solve the crime herself, much to the chagrin of the local authorities. But who can blame her? What else does an eleven-year-old science prodigy have to do when left to her own devices? With her widowed father and two older sisters far too preoccupied with their own pursuits and passions—stamp collecting, adventure novels, and boys respectively—Flavia takes off on her trusty bicycle Gladys to catch a murderer. In Alan Bradley's critically acclaimed debut mystery, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, adult readers will be totally charmed by this fearless, funny, and unflappable kid sleuth. But don't be fooled: this carefully plotted detective novel (the first in a new series) features plenty of unexpected twists and turns and loads of tasty period detail. As the pages fly by, you'll be rooting for this curious combination of Harriet the Spy and Sherlock Holmes. Go ahead, take a bite. --*Lauren Nemroff*

A Q&A with Alan Bradley

Question: 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*.

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

AB: 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.

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

AB: People probably wonder, “What's a 70-year-old-man doing writing about an 11-year-old-girl in 1950s 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.

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

AB: 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.

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

AB: 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.

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

AB: 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.

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

AB: 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.

Q: 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?

AB: 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.

(Photo © Jeff Bassett)

From Publishers Weekly

Fans of Louise Fitzhugh's iconic Harriet the Spy will welcome 11-year-old sleuth Flavia de Luce, the heroine of Canadian journalist Bradley's rollicking debut. In an early 1950s English village, Flavia is preoccupied with retaliating against her lofty older sisters when a rude, redheaded stranger arrives to confront her eccentric father, a philatelic devotee. Equally adept at quoting 18th-century works, listening at keyholes and picking locks, Flavia learns that her father, Colonel de Luce, may be involved in the suicide of his long-ago schoolmaster and the theft of a priceless stamp. The sudden expiration of the stranger in a cucumber bed, wacky village characters with ties to the schoolmaster, and a sharp inspector with doubts about the colonel and his enterprising young detective daughter mean complications for Flavia and enormous fun for the reader. Tantalizing hints about a gardener with a shady past and the mysterious death of Flavia's adventurous mother promise further intrigues ahead. (*Apr.*)

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—When a stranger shows up dying in her family's cucumber patch in the middle of the night, 11-year-old Flavia de Luce expands her interests from chemistry and poisons to sleuthing and local history. The youngest of a reclusive widower's three daughters, Flavia is accustomed to independence and takes delight in puzzles and "what if's." She is well suited to uncovering the meaning of the dead snipe left at the kitchen door, the story behind the bright orange Victorian postage stamps, and—eventually—the identity of the murderer and his relationship to the dying man. Bradley sets the protagonist on a merry course that includes contaminating her oldest sister's lipstick with poison ivy, climbing the bell tower of the local boys'

school, and sifting through old newspapers in the village library's outbuilding. Flavia is brave and true and hilarious, and the murder mystery is clever and satisfying. Set in 1950, the novel reads like a product of that time, when stories might include insouciance but relative innocence, pranks without swear words, and children who were not so overscheduled or frightened that they couldn't make their way quite nicely in chatting up the police or the battle-shocked family retainer. Mystery fans, Anglophiles, and science buffs will delight in this book and may come away with a slightly altered view of what is possible for a headstrong girl to achieve.—*Francisca Goldsmith, Halifax Public Libraries, Nova Scotia*

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Users Review

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