

# DEADLY DEVICES

*Mystery writer Phyllis Smallman talks shop*



**L**ess than a decade ago, Phyllis Smallman's writing career consisted of an unquenchable curiosity, a fondness for mysteries and a stack of unpublished manuscripts gathering dust in a drawer.

BY ELIZABETH NOLAN  
Photo by Jen MacLellan



"I had so many rejections I made a papier maché bowl out of them," Smallman confides over coffee at her Salt Spring condo.

It took 15 years of trying and Smallman had passed her 60th birthday before *Margarita Nights* got picked up as the result of a contest for new Canadian mystery writers. She now has six titles on book store shelves and more in the works, in two different mystery series featuring plucky female heroines.

Despite winning two awards and some important industry notice, Smallman isn't one to rest on her newfound laurels.



From top: Phyllis Smallman with an award from the Florida Writers' Association awards dinner in 2013; her first Singer Brown mystery book, published by Touchwood Editions this year. The action takes place on a fictional island in the Pacific Northwest.

## THE SIMPLE CURIOSITY THAT EVERYONE FEELS WHEN THEY SEE AN UNFAMILIAR PERSON OR SITUATION IS THE JUMPING-OFF POINT FOR ALL OF SMALLMAN'S WRITING.

"I've met a lot of published authors and I think they're always amazed to find themselves in that position, and especially when you start as late as I did. You never take anything for granted," she says.

Originally from Ontario, Smallman and her husband have kept a second home in southern Florida for 28 years. They moved their other residence to Salt Spring in 2007, and now divide their time equally between two idyllic spots.

The series that Smallman started with *Margarita Nights* follows Sherri Travis, a smart and beautiful woman with extremely humble roots and some pretty bad luck when it comes to dead bodies. While the characters and plot lines effortlessly pull readers in, settings are just as significant. The small beach town in the Florida Keys that Smallman calls Jacaranda is the epicentre of the series, but plots spread out to the mainland's ranch country and beyond.

The simple curiosity that everyone feels when they see an unfamiliar person or situation is the jumping-off point for all of Smallman's writing. The difference is, she takes the additional step of inventing the answers to all those "what ifs."

During her last sojourn down south, Smallman could be found paddling through the Everglades, soaking up local colour for an upcoming novel by kayaking the mangrove swamp — including for two hours after sunset — in man-made tunnels that are frequented by alligators.

"Alligators' eyes really do shine in the dark, and they're red when you shine your flashlight on them," Smallman reports.

The trip was motivated by the latest Sherri Travis book (now in the editing process at Touchwood Editions), which started with Smallman wondering what would happen to someone if they were robbed of their wallet, keys and cellphone and left alone at the edge of the wilderness.

*Long Gone Man*, the just-released debut title in Smallman's Singer Brown series, began with the author's fascination with Gulf Islands culture, as experienced

just after she moved to Salt Spring. The location is transformed to the fictional Glenphiddie Island, a misty hideaway in the Pacific Northwest where an old rock band makes its its retreat. The series' title character began with Smallman's glimpse of a bohemian island visitor who was apparently down on her luck, and a related thought about a famous artist.

"I always wondered what would have happened to Janis Joplin if she lived," Smallman explains. "I could not picture her adjusting to the look or the style [of the '70s/'80s], but I could see her singing on the street."

Smallman acknowledges that during the writing of the first *Singer Brown* book she was seeing Salt Spring through the eyes of a newcomer, much like the main character does. Motifs like unmarked roads disappearing into the fog and people living in their vans are therefore prominent. Now that she's been here a few years, the next book will offer a slightly different view as Smallman and her character take in the island's farms and rural history.

Smallman frequently shares the lessons she's learned as an older debut writer at library readings, writing workshops and Skype meetings with book clubs. As a director on the board of the Crime Writers of Canada, she'll be in Toronto next June for the *Bloody Words* conference.

At the 2013 Florida Book Awards she picked up a silver medal for her novel *Champagne For Buzzards*.

Despite having such an active schedule, Smallman is always writing, and has two books underway at all times.

With everything but the stack of unpublished manuscripts still in her arsenal, there's no end in sight for the creative journey that began with a straight-shooting bartender in the town of Jacaranda, Florida.

"Honestly I don't think I'll live long enough to do all the ideas," Smallman says. "Maybe you get bored after a while. That hasn't happened yet."★