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Crime Fiction: Long Gone Man by Phyllis Smallman

I must admit to being skeptical when I first learned that Canadian author Phyllis Smallman's latest literary effort, [Long Gone Man](#) (TouchWood Editions), would be a departure from her successful and long-running series set in the Florida Keys and featuring Sherry Travis, a sassy, in-your-face bartender and amateur sleuth. I'd grown accustomed to Smallman's likeable protagonist and the fine cast of supporting characters who inhabit the [Travis tales](#). Smallman has built a loyal and enthusiastic fan base for her five Sherry Travis

novels, and it takes real moxie to branch out with a new tale featuring an untested lead in a radically different setting. I needn't have worried, though; this savvy author has delivered an original, compelling and, it must be said, altogether darker tale to kick off her exciting new series.

Making her way to an isolated mountaintop on a remote island in southwestern British Columbia, Canada, Singer Brown is on a mission. Years earlier she had been the



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lead vocalist with Vortex, a rising rock band; then Singer's lover, Michael, a roadie for the group, had died under mysterious circumstances while they were on tour in Europe. Devastated, Singer dropped out of the band, her life spiraling downward, until, homeless, she had been forced to sing on street corners to survive. Now, driven by desperation, Singer seeks the band's mountain retreat in search of a bit of cash and a place to hang out for a few days. And nagging in the back of her mind the question remains: Who killed Michael, and why?

The notion of hitting a dead end takes on new meaning when Singer arrives at the rock group's compound and discovers that the leader of the band, Johnny Vibald, known as "Johnny Vibes," has just been fatally shot. Johnny's wife, Lauren, thinks Singer may have committed the crime, while Singer suspects the wife. But realizing that they'll each be prime suspects in the eyes of the law, these two women finally band together to alibi one other for the murder of the man they both despised.

Singer struggles to imagine who else might have hated Johnny enough to kill him. Besides a few locals, the only other people nearby are a handful of members of the rock group and their lawyer, who'd been having an affair with Johnny's wife. Complicating issues, the group had been approached by a business group that wanted to develop the island, a move that would have made them all wealthy. Only Johnny - - who held the majority share of the property rights -- opposed the plan.

The logic here is inescapable: If neither Singer nor Lauren killed the aging rock star, then someone else on the island must have. And it does not take Singer long to realize that in the dysfunctional world of this island retreat there is no shortage of people happy that Johnny Vibes is dead.

Long Gone Man marks the launch of a new series in which the lead character is a quirky and vulnerable, yet likeable character. A loner by nature, forced to live on the streets, Singer Brown is both canny and wary, yet retains a compassion for others, along with her belief that most people are basically good. Author Smallman deftly immerses Singer in a world defined by greed, selfishness and suspicion to produce an atmospheric and suspenseful tale that is all too believable.

Fans of her long-running Sherry Travis series will be happy to learn that Smallman, who divides her time between the islands off

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Vancouver, B.C., and the Florida Keys, is also hard at work on her sixth Sherry Travis novel, *The Last Martini*.◇

Jim Napier is a crime-fiction reviewer based in Quebec. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian papers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, [The Rap Sheet](#), *Shots*, *Reviewing the Evidence* and *Type M for Murder*. Napier also has an award-winning crime-fiction site, [Deadly Diversions](#).

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