

THE NATIONAL POST

The sweetness found him

Mark Medley, National Post Published: Saturday, March 14, 2009



Jeff Bassett/National Post Alan Bradley photographed at St. Michael and All Angels Cathedral in Kelowna, B.C.

Alan Bradley is on the move. After 16 years in Kelowna, B.C., he is about to embark on a holiday that will double as a book tour and writing retreat. His first stop? An island in Europe is all that he wants divulged. (No, not the United Kingdom.) He's not only taking off personally, so to speak, but professionally as well. Bradley is a full-blown publishing phenomenon. He has secured a six-book deal and his debut novel has already sold in 19 countries. And to have this happen at 70, well, it's not supposed to go down like this.

"It's like being in the glow of a fire," he says. "You hope you won't get burned."

The book sparking all this attention is *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*, a good old-fashioned mystery. It is narrated by the precocious Flavia de Luce, an 11-year-old with a fondness for chemistry and for annoying her two older sisters. Flavia discovers a body in the cucumber patch of her family's ancestral estate, on the outskirts of the picturesque (and fictional) village of Bishop's Lacey, in

the English countryside, a neck of the woods that Bradley had never visited until after he had written (and sold) the first chapter of *Sweetness*. After the police arrest her father, Flavia sets out to solve the crime and prove his innocence.

"Flavia's such a concoction of contradictions. It's one of the things that I very much love about her," says Bradley. "She's 11 but she has the wisdom of an adult. She knows everything about chemistry but nothing about family relationships."

The book is a page-turner, pure no-frills storytelling in the truest sense. And it's free of the gore that plagues many mysteries these days, something of which Bradley is proud. It is not a children's book, neither is it wholly an "adult" book. It falls into that grey area populated by books like Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, another novel featuring a memorable child narrator.

Bradley has completed *The Weed That Strings the Hangman's Bag*, the second book in a series of Flavia de Luce mysteries dubbed *The Buckshaw Chronicles*, after the sprawling Georgian manor in which several generations of de Luces have resided. The new book involves the village church and a travelling puppet show.

That gives Bradley, a native of Cobourg, Ont., some time, 18 months to be exact, before the third volume is due. That's where the travel comes in. He and his wife, Shirley, have sold their home and will leave Kelowna at the end of March. It is the second time they've left in recent years, though this time it's under far more favourable circumstances: In 2003, the Okanagan Mountain Park fires chased them from their home.

Prior to moving to Kelowna, Bradley spent 25 years in Saskatoon, where he was director of television engineering at the University of Saskatchewan. Even then, he was drawn to fiction. He joined a writing group that included Governor General-winning poet Anne Szumigalski, Brenda Riches, David Carpenter, Lois Simmie and such occasional members as Patrick Lane and Lorna Crozier. In 1988, he co-authored *Ms. Holmes of Baker Street*, which perturbed Holmes fans who didn't like his thesis that the great detective was a woman.

But it was in Kelowna, after taking early retirement, that Bradley began writing full-time. He published his memoirs, *The Shoebox Bible* in 2004, and then began work on a follow-up titled *Upstairs at the Roxy*, as well as a mystery, *Seeds of Antiquity*, about a CBC reporter in England. It was during the writing of this book that Bradley stumbled across Flavia de Luce, whom he often addresses as if she were real.

"She just materialized," he says. "I can't take any credit for Flavia at all."

He submitted the first chapter and won the 2007 Debut Dagger Award. In London for the ceremony - it was his first trip to England, despite an obvious fascination with the country - he secured a three-book deal.

Bill Massey, the editorial director of Orion Books, Bradley's U.K. publisher, was one of the judges: "I've never before jumped in for a multi-book deal based on a single chapter by an untried author," he writes in an email. "It's one thing to come up with a good set-up, but without the payoff, it can all still come to grief. So why the sudden rush of blood to the head? Well, Flavia just seemed so alive on the page, and her voice was so distinctive and engaging, that I just felt the rest of the story must somehow already be there. Nine times out of 10 I would have been proved wrong, but this time the gut feeling paid off."

Kristin Cochrane, deputy publisher of Doubleday Canada, bought the book on June 21, 2007, after Bradley's agent, Denise Bukowski, tracked her down at Book Expo Canada and handed her the first chapter along with a synopsis of the rest of the book and the proposed series. She read it that evening and "was just blown away by it. It was so fresh. It was so original," she says. "We've rarely, if ever, bought fiction on so little material."

Was she nervous the rest of the book wouldn't live up to the first chapter? She laughs. "I probably should, but I had this confidence. There's just something about the writing. He has such confidence in how he told the story that it gave me great confidence that he could pull it off," she says. "I think it was probably only when the full manuscript came in that it suddenly occurred to me, uh-oh, what if he hasn't pulled it off."

He has. The reviews have been solid and it's cracked best-seller lists in Canada.

The book has been sold in Slovakia. In Norway. In Taiwan. Bradley wants to visit every country in which the book is published. He feels he has all the time in the world now, to travel and write. His grandmother lived to be 101. His mother lived well into her 90s.

"I've probably got another quarter century," he says.

Weekend Post

mmedley@nationalpost.com