
Summary | Author | Book Reviews | Discussion Questions

Tenderness of Wolves

Stef Penney, 2006

400 pp.

In Brief

Winner, Costa (Whitbread) Award

The year is 1867. Winter has just tightened its grip on Dove River, a tiny isolated settlement in the Northern Territory, when a man is brutally murdered. Laurent Jammett had been a voyageur for the Hudson Bay Company before an accident lamed him four years earlier. The same accident afforded him the little parcel of land in Dove River, land that the locals called unlucky due to the untimely death of the previous owner.

A local woman, Mrs. Ross, stumbles upon the crime scene and sees the tracks leading from the dead man's cabin north toward the forest and the tundra beyond. It is Mrs. Ross's knock on the door of the largest house in Caulfield that launches the investigation. Within hours she will regret that knock with a mother's love -- for soon she makes another discovery: her seventeen-year-old son Francis has disappeared and is now considered a prime suspect.

In the wake of such violence, people are drawn to the crime and to the township -- Andrew Knox, Dove River's elder statesman; Thomas Sturrock, a wily American itinerant trader; Donald Moody, the clumsy young Company representative; William Parker, a half-breed Native American and trapper who was briefly detained for Jammett's murder before becoming Mrs. Ross's guide. But the question remains: do these men want to solve the crime or exploit it? /

One by one, the searchers set out from Dove River following the tracks across a desolate landscape -- home to only wild animals, madmen, and fugitives -- variously seeking a murderer, a son, two sisters missing for seventeen years, and a forgotten Native American culture before the snows settle and cover the tracks of the past for good.

In an astonishingly assured debut, Stef Penney deftly weaves adventure, suspense, revelation, and humor into an exhilarating thriller; a panoramic historical romance; a gripping murder mystery; and, ultimately, with the sheer scope and quality of her storytelling, an epic for the ages. (*From the publishers.*)

See also Author Q&A on publisher's website.

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About the Author

- Birth—1969
- Where—Edinburg, Scotland, UK
- Education—Bristol University
- Awards—Costa (Whitbread) Award
- Currently—lives in London, England

Stef Penney was born and grew up in Edinburgh. After earning a degree in philosophy and theology from Bristol University, she turned to filmmaking, studying film and TV at Bournemouth College of Art. On graduation she was selected for the Carlton Television New Writers Scheme. She is a screenwriter. *The Tenderness of Wolves* is her first novel. (*From the publisher.*)

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Critics Say. . .

The Tenderness of Wolves stood out from a very strong shortlist. We felt enveloped by the snowy landscape and gripped by the beautiful writing and effortless story-telling. It is a story of love, suspense and beauty. We couldn't put it down.

Costa Award Committee

An original and readable mixture of mystery and history, with a good dollop of old-fashioned adventure.

The Times (London)

In suitable Jack London style for a setting in Canada's snowy wastes, wolves wander in and out of this suspenseful 19th-century epic, offering a leitmotif of constant unease. So begins what masquerades as a traditional murder quiz but quickly broadens out to encompass other lines of inquiry -- the mystery of two long-missing young sisters, the quest for a forgotten native American culture, the twists and turns of an unusual love story. Stef Penney is from Edinburgh and claims never to have visited Canada -- impressive, then, that the land of her imagination convinces.

The Guardian

An entertaining, well-constructed mystery . . . sexy, suspenseful, densely plotted storytelling . . . a novel with far greater ambitions than your average thriller, combining as it does the themes of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with Atwood's *Survival*, and lashing them to a story that morphs Ian Rankin with *The Mad Trapper of Rat River*.

Globe and Mail (Canada)

The frigid isolation of European immigrants living on the 19th-century Canadian frontier is the setting for British author Penney's haunting debut. Seventeen-year-old Francis Ross disappears the same day his mother discovers the scalped body of his friend, fur trader Laurent Jammet, in a neighboring cabin. The murder brings newcomers to the small settlement, from inexperienced Hudson Bay Company representative Donald Moody to elderly eccentric Thomas Sturrock, who arrives searching for a mysterious archeological fragment once in Jammet's possession. Other than Francis, no real suspects emerge until half-Indian trapper William Parker is caught searching the dead man's house. Parker escapes and joins with Francis's mother to track Francis north, a journey that produces a deep if unlikely bond between them. Only when the pair reaches a distant Scandinavian settlement do both characters and reader begin to understand Francis, who arrived there days before them. Penney's absorbing, quietly convincing narrative illuminates the characters, each a kind of outcast, through whose complex viewpoints this dense, many-layered story is told.

Publishers Weekly

British filmmaker Penney sets her intriguing, well-wrought novel in a 19th-century Canadian farming community up-ended by the murder of a lone fur trapper. In the town of Dove River on the north shore of Georgian Bay, a middle-aged farmer's wife we know only as Mrs. Ross discovers the body of French trapper Laurent Jammet, scalped and with his throat cut. The leaders of the community and the all-important Hudson Bay Company men gather to make sense of the killing, which revives sore memories of teenage sisters Amy and Eve Seton, who set out on a picnic 15 years before and never returned. Mrs. Ross is particularly concerned about Jammet's murder because 17-year-old Francis, an Irish orphan she and her husband took in when he was five, has

not come home from a fishing trip. Suspicion falls on the boy, who was known to frequent Jammet's cabin. Several other characters emerge with ties to the dead man, including Toronto lawyer Thomas Sturrock, who comes sniffing around for an ancient marked bone that might prove of invaluable archaeological consequence, and shady half-Indian intruder William Parker, who traded with Jammett. The first-person account of Mrs. Ross alternates with sections concerning Francis, who's being nursed by the kindly Norwegian inhabitants of Himmelvanger after collapsing with exhaustion while following the trail of Jammet's murderer. His determined mother has set out to find him; other search parties also track Francis, as well as Parker, runaways from Himmelvanger, people lost in the snow and the killer. Penney offers numerous strings to untangle, but moments of love amid the gelid wastes add some warmth to her teeming, multi-character tale. Winner of the U.K. Costa Book of the Year award for 2006, a striking debut by a writer with tremendous command of language, setting and voice.

Kirkus Reviews

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Book Club Discussion Questions

1. The novel is divided into four parts: Disappearance, The Fields of Heaven, The Winter Partners, and The Sickness of Long Thinking. Characterize each of these parts by what occurs within them and discuss why you think the author chose this format.
2. The people of Dove River are mostly settlers from foreign countries who have a very particular worldview rooted in their own struggle for survival. In what ways are the children in this book reflections of their parents? In what ways have they broken from their parents' examples? Does this lead to joy or sorrow? Give examples.
3. Living so rustically in such a closed society has given rise to a very particular set of rules in Dove River, such as the expectation that neighbors will make return offerings in kind when they've borrowed something. What other rules of survival -- either literally or socially -- are presented in this novel?
4. Francis is introduced as a mystery from his first day in Dove River: He arrives dressed as a girl for unknown reasons. Did you suspect that his relationship with Jammet was more than a friendship? Why or why not?
5. *The Tenderness of Wolves* is a story told from the perspective of several different characters, but Mrs. Ross's sections are the only ones written in first person. What effect does this have on your reading experience? Why do you think the author does this?
6. Mrs. Ross is always referred to formally as "Mrs. Ross," even by the narrator. What is the significance of this choice?
7. On page 154, Parker explains what the "sickness of long thinking" is to Mrs. Ross. Who in this story is suffering from the sickness of long thinking? Support your opinion with examples from the novel.
8. The author has been applauded for her ability to build suspense. Identify some of the clues she subtly drops along the way and explain how they either misdirected you or gave you hints toward solving the various mysteries of the novel.
9. Donald tries to elicit sympathy from Elizabeth for her father on page 338 by telling her, "It's only human to want an answer." Do you think this explanation satisfies her? Would it satisfy you? Why or why not? Who else in this novel is searching for answers? Does anyone find what they are

looking for?

10. In contrast to most of the other relationships in this novel, Line and Espen seem to have a deep passion for one another. Were you surprised that he abandons her? Why or why not?

11. The women in this novel find themselves in situations of varying frustration and sorrow. Compare and contrast these characters: Susannah and Maria, Mrs. Ross, Ann Pretty, Line, and Elizabeth Bird. What do they have in common, and how are they different? Do you feel sympathy for any of them? Why or why not?

12. Explore the symbolism of Donald's spectacles and his near-sightedness. What does this symbol tell you about his character? What is it that he sees most clearly just before his death?

13. Do you think that Mrs. Ross really loves William Parker, or is it something else? What did you expect would happen to Mrs. Ross when she left with Parker to track down Francis?

14. The backdrop of Canada, still largely unsettled in the mid- to late 1800s, provides a hauntingly beautiful and frighteningly dangerous setting for the lives of these very different people. How does the wilderness change the characters in this novel?

15. What is the significance of the title, *The Tenderness of Wolves*? Relate it to the story and give examples to support your interpretation. (*Questions provided by publisher.*)

Also, see Author Q&A on publisher website.

One of Penny's Research Sources

Google Book Search "life in the backwoods" moodie

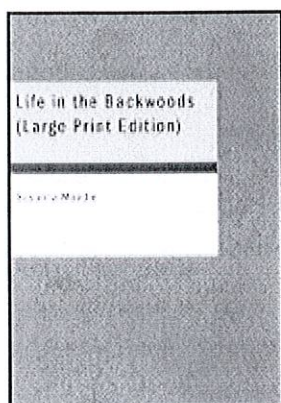
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Life in the Backwoods By Susanna Moodie



Preview this book

It was a bright, frosty morning when I bade adieu to the farm, the birthplace of my little Agnes, who, nestled beneath my cloak, was sweetly sleeping on my knee, unconscious of the long journey before us into the wilderness.

More details

Life in the Backwoods: A Sequel to Roughing it in the Bush

By Susanna Moodie

Edition: large print

Published by BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2007

ISBN 1426429770,

9781426429774

208 pages

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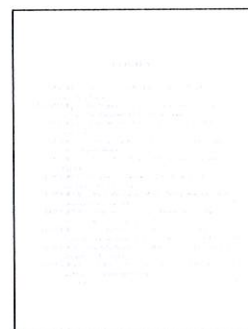


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Popular passages

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Cast thy bread upon the waters, and thou shalt find
it after many days. - Page 47

Appears in 345 books from 1814-2007

We were parched with thirst, and there was not a
drop of water in the house, and none to be
procured nearer than the lake. I turned once more to
the door, hoping that a passage might have been
burnt through to the water. I saw nothing but a
dense cloud of fire and smoke — could hear nothing
but the crackling and roaring of flames, which were
gaining so fast upon us that I felt their scorching
breath in my face. - Page 55

Appears in 12 books from 1852-2007

The pure beauty of the Canadian water, the sombre
but august grandeur of the vast forest that hemmed
us in on every side and shut us out from the rest of
the world, soon cast a magic spell upon our spirits,
and we began to feel charmed with the freedom and
solitude around us. - Page 29

Appears in 7 books from 1978-2007

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Life in the Backwoods (a Sequel to Roughing It in the Bush)

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130 pages

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It was a bright frosty morning when I
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of my little Agnes whonestled beneath
my cloak was sweetly sleeping on my
knee unconscious of the long...

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Key terms

Peterborough, Stony Lake, canoe, Bay of Quinte, venison, Dummer, Douro, muskrats, pickled cucumbers, squaw, potatoes, Otonabee river, clergy reserve, backwoods of Canada, swamp, old Jenny, Emilia, Clear Lake, pork, sleigh

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"A person abroad in the woods tonight would be frozen. Flesh and blood could not withstand this cutting wind.

Oh the cold of Canada nobody knows

The fire burns our shoes without warming our toes

Oh dear, what shall we do?

Our blankets are thin and our noses are blue—

It's at zero without, and we're freezing within

(Chorus) Oh dear what shall we do.

Ditty in "Life In The Backwoods"

CYBER  MUSE
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CyberMUSE: Artwork Page

Cornelius Krieghoff

Indian Woman Crossing Frozen River (1855 - 1865)

Ontario Wilderness





Notes from Nancy (Librarian)

Characters

Small community but many characters involved:

Mrs. Ross: Character:

Air of refinement: Line catches a glimpse and then fixes on the other person as she realizes it is a white woman> It is so unusual to see a woman like that—she has, even thru the clothing, an air of refinement.

Forthright. Not afraid to fight for Francis: p. 91 wanting to talk to Wm Parker: “He is a boy and if you stop me finding out whatever I can, you may be responsible for his death.”

Knox steps backward – looking into her flinty eyes he is aware of the fierceness of her will. “I would have thought that you, of all people, would understand what it is to lose a child. Would you deny me help?”

p. 141: And yet I feel more at peace than I have done for some time. We are on our way. I am doing something to help Francis. I am doing something to prove how much I love him and that matters because I’m afraid he has forgotten.

p. 145 Fear of wilderness and happiness: I am happier than I have been for a long time (as long as I am not actually thinking about him lying hurt and frozen.’ I never thought I could stray so far into the wilderness without fear. What I always hated about the for...is its sameness. ...so few varieties of trees, when the snow makes them all cloaked, somber shapes and the forest a dim, twilit place. I used to have a nightmare: I am in the middle of the for and turning around to look back the way I came, I find that every dir looks exactly alike. I panic. I am lost, I will never get out. Perhaps it is the extremity of my situation that makes it impossible or just pointless to be afraid. Nor am I afraid of my taciturn guide....I have started to trust him. Walking for eight hours through fresh snow is a good way to still the mind’s restless ness. P. 156: never felt free in the wild. Emptiness suffocates me.

147..I feel a sting like a nettle and that is a memory, the memory of the greenhouse at the pubic asylum and how it smelled the same as .Dr Watson when I pressed my face into his shirtfront. The only thing that can smell like Watson and the greenhouse in this frozen forest is Parker himself. At this point I cannot stop myself ...to get a stronger fix on that memory

Anger at Angus: p. 136: Meanwhile Parker cuts a stack of pine branches with the axe. (I suppose Angus will be cursing it’s loss, but that is too bad; he should have thought of that before abandoning his son.

p. 171 vigorously pursuing Murray: I t would surely be just as negligent not to pursue other possibilities. The trail may be the murderer’s or it may not. How can you find out if don’t follow it? Mr. Moody, that is no excuse at all. We must follow the trail, because when the weather permits, there will be nothing left...and your duty is to find the truth and nothing else.. Moody: It is not for you, Mrs. Ross, to tell me how to do my duty. Mrs. R: It is for anyone to point out a dereliction of duty in a case as important as

this. More....crafty : If it comes to a court of law, the presence of the trail and the possibility that it gives rise to...well, it would throw your conclusions into question.

P 165

(Unconvincing when she finds Francis – not forthright. But beats up herself;) I failed to make his childhood happy and now that he is grown up I cannot protect him....

P 186 (Courageous.) Francis nods, His mother's face is grim and determined.....He feels a sudden surge of gratitude to her, for doing what he meant to do, when she is so afraid of the wilderness.. **Bone tablet:** p. 186. he hands his mother the leather bag with the tablet in it. Be careful with he, he mumbles. She gives him a look; she who is always careful with things.

Asylum(Part 3: The Winter Partners) p 196 Since I had held back from the general idol worship, I was surprised to get a summons to Watson's office and wondered what I had done wrong.. Of course, the room is even more attractive with you in it. Despite knowing his ways, I felt a hint of a blush then. P 197 I couldn't for the life of me see how staring at pictures of women covered in flowers would produce a cure for madness, but who was I to say so. Besides, he was a handsome, kind, youngish man and I was an orphan in an asylum with little prospect of leaving. P. 199 he smelled of the the green houses, of tomato leaves and earth, sharp and satisfying. Even now, I cannot remember that smell w/o also thinking fruit pies with cream or steak in brandy. Even the other night, in a frozen tent, it brought water to my mouth . p. 199 When I feel melancholy and this is quite often nowadays I remind myself that he trembled when he touched me that I was once someone's muse.

Love: Mr. Parker: p 222 I am certain that I am trying not to, but I find myself looking into Parker's eyes for a second that lengthens and grows into a minute. Neither of us says anything it's as if we are mesmerized. I am suddenly aware that my breathing sounds very loud and I am sure he can hear my heart beating. Even the wolves are silent, listening. I tear my eyes away at last, feeling light-headed....p 223 ...an intense desire to go back into the stable and lie down in the straw next to him. What is this – my fear and helplessness overtaking me. P 300. I wake in the depths of night. There are tears drying on my face, cold. I wondered for so long why he had become so distant from me.. I assumed it was something I had done. And then when Parker told me about Jammet, I thought it was because of Francis, because he knew and hated it. In truth it had begun a long time before that. **WHY? But as I have found so often in life, what you truly long for eludes you.**

Finding out about Francis 268. Jammet was, Well he had been married, sometimes he also had ...friends. Young men, handsome, like your son. He cared about him deeply.

" I cannot bear the thought I did not realize what was happening. I cannot bear the thought that Angus hated him for it. I cannot bear the thought of Francis's grief. And I cannot bear the thought that when I saw him, I did not comfort him nearly enough. "

p. 301

Angus p 347 Ross turns to her for the first time and stares at her (Line – after finding out she saw Mrs. Ross and son and they are both well.) Sturrock would never have believed, had he not seen it, how that granite face could melt.

Scott: p. 94: Scott's face is disturbingly pink and shing....Knox is suddenly reminded of a pigthat's used to snuffle coquettishly for tidbits, its snout poked through the hedge at the bottom of the garden.I

Voice: 1st person Mrs Ross

Then every other is 3rd person. Who owns the story?

Parker:

p. 270 men who mutineered and took furs. Dozens of silver and black fox.

Stewart sent here (Hanover). What has this to do with jammet?Last winter I found the furs. I told Laurent. He was going to arrange buyers in the states. But he could never keep his mouth shut when he'd been drinking. He boasted. Word must have got out got back to Stewart. That's why he dies. Why Stewart? Wanted to be a hero the company would take him back.

Intrigue:

Knox and Sturrock.. p 90 – And then there is the business of Sturrock, which he can't ignore.

p. 93: Knox finds Sturrock in residence at the Scotts. Knox says: "I expect you know why I've come." "Knox feels awkward. He had forgotten the effect of Sturrock's presence and had almost managed to persuade himself that the accepted story going around Caulfield was true. ST: I am not tempted to contradict the,, if that's what worries you. Knox: It's my wife I'm worried about. Cause of anguish to her...I'm sure you understand."

p. 94:Knox: Can I be of any assistance to you (ST). Half an hour later and several dollars lighter he makes his way out the house.

p.96: Knox: He has shut his mouth on the truth before. He can do it again.

Point about Mrs Ross and Wm Parker not knowing her first name:

p. 136: ...although I haven't told him my first name, and he isn't likely to ask.

Parker and his ability to find a trail: p. 140: But will you be able to find the trail? Yes. I remind myself that he is a trapper and used to following subtle, lightfooted creatures through the snow. But his confidence seems to stem from more than that. Once again, I have the sense that he already knows where the trail is going to lead.

Relationships

Mrs. Ross and Parker:

About the dogs and them: It strikes me that there is a certain symmetry between the two dogs and the two humans on this trail. I wonder if this thought has occurred to Parker.

Miscellaneous

Imagery:

P 329 Drawing of Jammett by Francis. There next to her heart it burns like a hot coal, causing a warm flush to climb over her throat. In the end she tucks it impatiently down the side of her boot, but even from there it sends filaments of heat stealing up her leg as she rides back to Caulfield.

p. 336. Donald: Doesn't it always matter, finding the truth? He thinks of Laurent jammet, of their supposed quest for truth – all those events tumbling one into another like a trail of dominoes – all leading him across the snow covered plains to this little hut.

Eliz: I didn't know (they never stopped looking). I waited for such a long time. No one came. Then, when I saw my father, again, I thought, now you come, when I'm happy, when it's too late. And he kept asking about Amy. Her voice is thin and husky, stretch to breaking point. I lost Amy too. "Donald feels ashamed of himself. Her parents had been the object of so much sympathy; everyone was in awe of their loss. But the lost grieve too. Eliz; I want you to tell them about me.

P 338: Donald Your father only wanted an answer . you do know that, don't you it wasn't that he didn't love you. It's only human to want an answer.

S

Sickness of Long Thinking: p 318

P 353. mrs. Ross I remember a time once, when I set out on a long journey, and I suppose it has stayed in my mind so vividly because it marked the end of one period of my life and the beginning of another. (not referring to the atlantic voyage, unspeakable as it was). My journey was from the gates of the asylum to a great crumbling house in the western highlands. Accompanied by the man who was to become my husband...I had no idea of the significance of the journey, but once begun, my whole life began to change absolutely and forever. I would never have guessed it but I never returned to Edinburgh, and indeed as the carriage left the asylum behind on its long drive, certain ties were severed – from my past, from my parents, from my relatively comfortable background, from my class, even – that would never be reconnected. I liked to think of that journey afterward, imagining the hand of fate at work, snipping the threads behind me....wondering whether I was mad, to have left the asylum and its relative comforts. And I wondered how often are we aware of irreversible forces at work while they are in operation. Of course I was not. And conversely, I suppose, how often do we imagine that something is of great significance only for it to evaporate like morning mist, leaving no trace. William parker, you are my love (360).

I find when it occurs to me to look that I have lost the bone tablet.

I have been thinking of course and dreaming when I sleep of parker. And this must I know; he thinks of me. But we are a conundrum to which there is no answer. After so much horror, we cannot go on – if I am honest, never could have. And yet, whenever we

stop I cannot take my eyes from his face. Dove, lodestone, my true north. I turn always to him.

Parker. page

Clue: Page 136

* You have never told me your name. You have used it often enough. I force myself my mind to turn to Francis and Dove River. Angus. The pieces I have to put back together.

I force myself to feel the sickness of long thinking. And then Parker turns back to the dogs and the sled and so do I. For what else can any of us do?

Donald: I have discovered something extraordinary – I love. He looks on with astonishment through the tunnel he sees the life he would have had with Maria; their marriage, their children, their quarrels their petty disagreements. The arguments about his career. The moving to the city. The touch of her flesh... Maria Knox will never know the life she might have had, but Donald knows it. He knows and he is glad.



Interview with author Stef Penney

Get to know the author of *The Tenderness of Wolves*, our January Book Club pick.

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By Kat Tancock



[Learn more about the Canadian Living Book Club.](#)

Our January Book Club pick is *The Tenderness of Wolves* by Stef Penney, a gripping tale set in late-19th-century Canada. ([Click here to read an excerpt from the book.](#)) We chatted with Penney about her novel, her inspiration and her writing process.

Canadian Living: What was your inspiration for this novel?

Stef Penney: In a word, complicated! It grew, very slowly, out of the first screenplay I ever wrote, 12 years ago, which ended with Mrs. Ross and Angus emigrating to Canada as part of the Highland Clearances. I loved the characters and always felt that I would go back to them somewhen. At first, all I knew was that it was a story about Mrs. Ross looking for someone in winter -- that was the starting point -- I didn't know who she was looking for, or why. And I have long had an obsession with cold climates, snow and ice (Why? Good question...) and devoured books on the subject -- the history of polar exploration, for example.

CL: How did you research your subject? Did you travel to Canada?

SP: No, I've never been to Canada! Until quite recently I was agoraphobic and couldn't fly (or even travel by train). But I live near the British Library in London, and so I read everything I could find on the Canada of the period -- a lot of it written by Hudson Bay employees. In fact, the more I read, the more I became convinced that the Company had to be a part of the story.

CL: Can you describe your writing process?

SP: I try and keep office hours, but I'm not as disciplined as I'd like to be. I start out with research, then write some stuff longhand, often writing around the story -- characters' backgrounds or particular scenes. I need to know (roughly) where I'm going before I hit the computer.

CL: How did you keep track of all the characters?

SP: It wasn't that hard. It seemed very natural to have a lot of different perspectives and I always knew exactly where everyone was. But latterly I did make a chapter plan with the characters colour-coded so that I could assess the structure and check I hadn't left anyone hanging around for too long. Some people (my mother is one of them) have suggested it would be a good idea to have a sort of cast list at the beginning, so you can check back -- maybe in the paperback edition...

CL: What were your feelings on tackling such issues as homosexuality, racism and sexism in 19th-century Canada from a 21st-century Scottish perspective?

SP: Hmm. I'm not sure I had any particular strategy, and I certainly didn't set out to tackle any "issues" as such; they just arose from the story. I don't think you can avoid tackling sexism if you're a female writer, whether writing about the past or the present -- likewise racism if you're dealing with a culture-clash scenario. My feelings were always governed by "how would I feel if I was in this situation." In other words, I didn't try to remove my 21st-century perspective -- it may not be the most accurate way to portray how people felt in the 19th century, but it was the way I wanted to write it.

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Leave me alone

On Wednesday Stef Penney won the coveted Costa Book of the Year award. She tells Stephen Moss about her long battle with agoraphobia, why she shuns celebrity - and why this could be her last ever interview

Stephen MossThe Guardian, Friday 9 February 2007

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Stef Penney ... 'It would be very scary to do this again but with a load more expectation'. Photograph: David Levene

The morning-after interview with the winner of a big literary prize is a time-honoured ritual. Bleary-eyed journalist turns up having speed-read book; equally bleary-eyed prize-winner makes allowances for thinness of textual detail in interviewer's questions; publisher and bookshops look forward to large boost in sales. Stef Penney, winner of the £25,000 Costa Book of the Year award, plays the game - but only up to a point. She is here - fortunately in a bistro-style restaurant in Hackney rather than the soulless hotel usually reserved for these encounters - but says she loathes doing interviews and that standing in front of a dozen flashing cameras at the prize dinner the previous night had made her feel like a criminal emerging from court.

She is serious, too: this is no arty pose. When she is having her photograph taken - looking far more severe than she really is - her phone goes off. She looks at the number. "Private caller - another journalist," she says, and ignores it. This reluctance to engage, the refusal to accept that writing an award-winning book makes you public property, could be frustrating, but she is so upfront about it, and so charming and wry when she chooses to be, that she doesn't seem testy or evasive. Her sculpted beauty also helps me forgive her for letting my questions hang on the rusty hooks of their own banality. "Why is he gay?" I ask of one key character. "Well some people just are, you know," she says, simply and crushingly.

Her book, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, is a gripping adventure story set in Canada in the 1860s - part detective story, part romance, but most of all a western. Penney loves westerns and was determined to write one. I don't think I could have put it down, even if I had had more than six hours to read it.

Its pace may owe something to the fact that before writing this debut novel, she wrote screenplays. But novel-writing, she says, gave her a new freedom. "With screenwriting you're much more aware of the fact that it's a collaborative process and you're always going to be talking to directors and producers. You might be able to see pictures and have this wonderful, perfect creation in your head, but you know you're going to come up against reality. There are going to be this series of steps when you make little compromises, and you end up stepping further and further away from this perfect film. You might end up with something that's great in a different way, but it's still a bit of a disappointment."

She finished the book four years ago, and has spent the time since cutting, honing and, more importantly, finding a publisher. Plenty turned it down, some put off by the mix of first-person and third-person narrative. The former is supplied by her main protagonist, Mrs Ross, a character who featured in one of Penney's early screenplays. The screenplay, called Nova Scotia, which she hopes will shortly be made into a film, had Mrs Ross marrying and then leaving her Scottish home for Canada; the novel picks up her life in the wilds of North America 15 years later, trying to resolve a multiple mystery and falling in love again.

"At the end of the screenplay I'd sent these characters off in a boat to Canada," she says. "I really loved them and I wanted one day to go back and do something with them, but the more I thought about it I realised that I couldn't do this as a screenplay because I wanted to weave in too many stories. It was such a pleasure in the book to be able to digress and to think, 'Well, I know this isn't strictly relevant, but I don't care - it's my book.' I didn't know everything that was going to happen, but I did know what the end was going to be - a shootout, like a real western."

Mrs Ross shares one characteristic with her creator - agoraphobia. Shortly after leaving Bristol University, where she studied philosophy and theology, and before she began a film and TV course at Bournemouth College of Art, Penney started to suffer agoraphobic panic attacks. "My fear wasn't of crowds or being out in the open," she explains. "It was more a fear of losing control. For me it was public transport, and the bigger and faster, the worse it was, so planes were the scariest thing. Once you're in a plane you really can't say, 'Actually, let me out here'; there's nothing you can do. It's that feeling that it's totally out of your control."

Mrs Ross was a direct response to those attacks. "She came very specifically from thinking about how someone with agoraphobic panic attacks would have been dealt with or would have coped in the Victorian, pre-Valium era," she says. "It's very appealing setting something in the past, and speculating on what it would be like. Agoraphobia is a difficult thing to explain to people, so perhaps it was an attempt to try to explain what it's like. This was what was happening to me."

Agoraphobia is central to the screenplay Nova Scotia; in *The Tenderness of Wolves* it provides a backbeat, as it now seems to in Penney's own life. "It is under control now," she says. "I can manage it. I can fly now, and that's fantastic. I gradually worked my way up through bus, tube, coach, train, plane. I did all sorts of things to get it under control. I had hypnotherapy and I went to group therapy, which was brilliant. At group therapy there were people with different problems, not just agoraphobics, and it gave me a different perspective." The improvement, however, came too late for her to visit Canada to research the book; she relied instead on intensive reading in the British Library and an imaginative re-creation of the struggle to survive in a wilderness.

She says she has no idea what originally triggered the attacks. "That's the million-dollar question. Everyone asks that and you personally want there to be a simple 'Oh, this caused it' because if something simple caused it, maybe something simple can cure it. But it's not that simple. It's always going to be a combination of all sorts of things." The attacks persisted for more than a decade and restricted her chances to direct. "It made it

much more difficult to go out there and say 'I'm a director' because you have to do anything, go anywhere. That was a factor in making me lean towards writing." She has, though, managed to direct two short films, one of them - she admits with a flicker of embarrassment - about agoraphobia.

The fact that her condition has been a factor in her work makes it a legitimate subject for discussion - it is the one aspect of her private life she will talk about freely - but she is also wary of it dominating views of her. It was certainly the angle taken in the coverage of the Costa award; she has become the "agoraphobic novelist" - in part, she says, because publicists are desperate for a label to attach to a writer.

"When you initially have your meeting with the PR company, they say, 'What angles can we take? Are there any exciting stories? Do you know any famous people?', and you go, 'No, no, no, no, I'm not related to anyone famous.' And then I said, 'Given that the main character is agoraphobic, I don't mind talking about my agoraphobia,' and everyone seized on it in a really big way. But I think it will all die away eventually, and everyone will move on. I'll probably take forever to write the next book, so everyone will have lost interest."

Her next novel - it's not about Mrs Ross or Canada is all she will say about it - is already well under way, though not yet sold to a publisher. More pressing, however, is a screenplay that she is willing to describe. "It's a road movie set in Lapland about two girls driving through northern Finland. It's contemporary, quite comic, and very different from *The Tenderness of Wolves*."

Is she now a novelist or a screenwriter? "You can't write one novel and say, 'Now I'm a novelist.' At the moment I'm working on a screenplay, so I feel like a screenwriter." Having won the Costa prize for her first book, she worries about second-novel syndrome. "It would be very scary to do this again but with a load more expectation. When you write a first book, no one is expecting anything, which is a nice, free situation to be in. I can't ever have that again, which is a shame."

I try asking some personal stuff, but don't get very far. In fact, I don't really get beyond "You're 37, aren't you?" "I don't think age is particularly relevant," she says, nicely, charmingly. The biog, however, reads something like: grew up in Edinburgh (all trace of a Scottish accent now gone, replaced by a London twang); middle-class (and religious) parents; librarian mother; demanding, headstrong child; didn't like school; rejected the church but enjoyed intense discussions with a friendly minister - hence the philosophy and theology degree; became a screenwriter and film-maker; and headed for London - which she loves because it allows you "to choose where you want to be and who you want to be".

All this, though, she would dismiss as "pop psychology" and, worse, an intrusion. "I've written a book, I've sold the book, and the book's public - fine. But I haven't gone on Big Brother. That's not me. I'm a writer, and I want to go and sit in a room on my own." Then she goes to the loo, signalling that our conversation is over. "I hope this is the last interview I will ever have to do," she says a few minutes later as we head to an appropriately snow-clad London Fields to take her photograph. This may be directed at me, for asking dumb questions and forgetting Mrs Ross's first name (mentioned only once in the book), but I don't think so. She really does believe you should read the book, not the life.

• *The Tenderness of Wolves* is published by Quercus at £12.99

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Bibliographic Record 181169 - MARC21 - Polaris

Control number:	181169	Owner:	Farmington Community Library (sys)	Record status:	Final
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260		#aBeverly Hills, CA :#b20th Century Fox Home Entertainment,#cc2001.
300		#a2 videodiscs :#bsd., col. ;#c4 3/4 in.

Biography Resource Center

Stef Penney

1969-

Birth: 1969 in Edinburgh, Scotland

Nationality: British, Scottish

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2008.

Entry updated: 07/29/2008

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"Sidelights"

Stef Penney is a Scottish writer, screenwriter, and filmmaker based in London, England. After earning a degree in philosophy and theology at Bristol University, Penney took up filmmaking. She has written and directed several short films, and has created works for the BBC and the British Film Council.

Penney is also a novelist, and her debut work, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, garnered considerable critical and commercial attention, both for Penney and her original British publisher, Quercus. Set in the vast winter lands of Canada, the novel concerns a murder mystery on the rugged open frontier. The book was awarded the 2007 Costa Award (formerly the Whitbread Prize) for Best First Novel, as well as the Costa Award for Novel of the Year. Anthony Cheetham, chairman of Quercus, noted in the *Bookseller* that the novel's success would raise the publisher's profile considerably. The effects for Penney would also be profound, he said. "Literary prizes are not really that important--unless you have the good fortune to be on the receiving end," Cheetham mused. "For Stef Penney, the Costa is a triumph and an ordeal: the price of success is that a very private persona has now slipped, unmasked, into the public domain." An important element of that persona adds to the remarkable story of this debut novel: during the research and writing of the work, Penny suffered from agoraphobia. She never traveled to Canada to observe and experience the harsh, winter-gripped landscape she evokes in her book. Her agoraphobia made such travel impossible. Instead, Penney researched her story entirely within the relatively secure confines of the British Library. Even so, her efforts resulted in a book that "takes your breath away because it comes so close to perfection," commented *Bookbag* reviewer Sue Magee.

The Tenderness of Wolves is set in the cold and bleak environs of Canada's northern territory in the nineteenth century. Winter is approaching the small town of Dove River, threatening to bring

dangerous cold and potentially lethal snowfall to an already treacherous landscape. As the novel opens, the protagonist, known only as Mrs. Ross, discovers the body of fur trapper Laurent Jammet, scalped and with his throat cut. Soon, the town authorities have gathered to investigate the murder, bringing in Hudson Bay representative Donald Moody to help out. Tellingly, Mrs. Ross's seventeen-year-old foster son, Francis, an Irish orphan she and her husband took in when he was five, disappears the same day that Jammet's murder is discovered. Francis was known to visit Jammet frequently, and his abrupt disappearance brings down great suspicion on him. Two sets of footprints in the snow lead away from Jammet's cabin, one set is believed to be Francis's. As the investigation unfolds, it hearkens back to another mystery from years before, when three girls went out on a picnic and only one returned.

The murder brings other newcomers to Dove River, including Thomas Sturrock, an elderly attorney who is in search of an ancient fragment of bone once owned by Jammet and which bears on its surface important historical etchings. A new suspect in the murder emerges when half-Indian trapper William Parker, who frequently traded with Jammet, is discovered searching the dead man's cabin. Through it all, Mrs. Ross is determined to find out the truth about the murder and exonerate her son, and she and Parker head north into the treacherous Canadian winter to find Francis and the answers that will prove his innocence. A distant Scandinavian settlement known as Himmelvanger will prove to be critical to all the novel's significant characters, even as their harrowing journey forges an unlikely bond between Parker and Mrs. Ross. The Canadian landscape and atmosphere is "so vividly drawn that I felt physically cold and terrified by the conditions the travelers faced," Magee remarked.

"This book wasn't written; it was crafted and in years to come it will be thought of as a classic," concluded Magee. Throughout the novel, commented *Library Journal* contributor Barbara Hoffert, "characters are distinctive, their portraits startling and incisive, and the writing is fluid and beautifully detailed." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic called the novel "a striking debut by a writer with tremendous command of language, setting, and voice." *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Jennifer Reese named it a "gripping, elegantly written, and uncommonly powerful debut."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1969, in Edinburgh, Scotland. **Education:** Graduate of Bristol University; studied film and TV in Bournemouth; participant in Carlton Television New Writers Scheme. **Addresses:** Home: London, England.

AWARDS

Costa Award for Best First Novel and Costa Book of the Year Award (formerly Whitbread Prize), both 2007, both for *The Tenderness of Wolves*.

CAREER

Writer, novelist, screenwriter, and filmmaker. Writer and director of two short films and programs for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and British Film Council.

WRITINGS:

- *The Tenderness of Wolves*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2007.

Author of screenplay for *The Seed*, adaptation of Davide de Angelis novel; writer and director of

The Knowledge, produced and distributed by the British Film Council; writer and director of *You Drive Me*, for British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); writer and director of *The Messenger*, BPCAD/Kelso Films; writer and director of *The Baker's Tale*, BPCAD; writer, *Lune*, BPCAD; and adaptor and screenwriter, *El Amor Oculto*, BPCAD.

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