

THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. What does “the beautiful mystery” of the title refer to? What are the powers and/or limitations of music throughout the novel?
2. As we get to know the inner workings of the monastery, how do you come to regard the community of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups and the individuals who choose to devote their lives to it?
3. To solve the crime Gamache needs “to think about the Divine, the human, and the cracks in between.” How do all of these qualities manifest themselves in the story?
4. What do you see as Gamache’s greatest strengths as a detective and as a man? Does he also have weaknesses?
5. How do you view Jean-Guy Beauvoir throughout the book? What do you think will become of him?
6. Because the monastery is so cut off from most methods of communication, text messages take on unusual importance for Gamache and Beauvoir. How does Louise Penny use them to convey the tone of real-world relationships?
7. What do you make of Francoeur’s fierce hatred for Gamache? What does the novel tell us about good and evil, and is the distinction between them always clear? For example, see page 318, where Gamache sits through the service in the Blessed Chapel amid “peace and rage, silence and singing. The Gilbertines and the Inquisition. The good men and the not-so-good.”
8. The abbot tells Gamache, “That’s the difference between us, Chief Inspector. You need proof in your line of work. I don’t.” What role does faith play for various characters in the novel?
9. At one point Gamache finds himself wondering if the abbot’s private garden “existed on different planes. It was both a place of grass and earth and flowers. But also an allegory. For that most private place inside each one of them. For some it was a dark, locked room. For others, a garden.” How might that allegory apply to particular characters in *The Beautiful Mystery*?
10. When Gamache quotes the line from *Murder in the Cathedral*, “Some malady is coming upon us,” Frère Sébastien replies, “Modern times. That’s what came upon the Gilbertines.” Do you feel that the monks could or should have remained in isolation from the outside world forever?
11. How is *The Beautiful Mystery* similar to / different from the books set in Three Pines?



THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY

PART 1

INTRODUCTION

I asked to enter into a discussion of *The Beautiful Mystery* because reading the Acknowledgments and the Prologue hooked me before ever opening Chapter One.

I'm a lifelong operaphile, starting at age 13 when a friend took me to see Renata Tebaldi singing in *La Traviata* at Chicago's Lyric Opera. Tebaldi was a robust woman, decked in a gorgeous dress featuring real camellias, so the idea that she grows increasingly frail and dies of consumption reeked of miscasting—except that her voice was glorious, passionate, convincing, the music moving, so in the end I accepted Violetta's fate. Music made me believe, music was the passport to Verdi's story, into a world where its logic, if you can call it that, ruled.

I've chased operas all over the world for 60 years now, and every performance produces the same immersion experience. And I've learned that opera grew out of church music, from the simple beginning, chants such as those sung by the monks of the monastery of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups, to more complex performances. As I've grown older I travel back from the complexities of Puccini to the operas of Monteverdi, then Cavalli, and back farther into the rediscovered music of Hildegard of Bingen.

You can make a little of this journey by listening to a transitional stage from chant to opera in the "The Play of Daniel." And read medievalist Priscilla Royal's mystery *The Valley of Dry Bones* inspired by this play. Its performance requires more of the singers than does chant since it is liturgical drama based on the biblical Book of Daniel accompanied by monophonic music. One of two surviving versions is found in a 13th-century manuscript containing ten liturgical dramas. Recordings exist, as they do of what it is imagined Hildegard's music was.

However, as Louise writes in the Prologue:

"... no one knew what the original chants sounded like. There was no written record of the earliest chants. They were so old, more than a millennium, that they predated written music. They were learned by heart . . . there was power in [their] very simplicity. Their first chants were soothing, contemplative, magnetic. They had such a profound effect on those who sang and heard them that the ancient chants became known as '*The Beautiful Mystery*.' The monks believed they were singing the word of God. . . ."

"Gregorian chant was the father of western music. But it was eventually killed by its ungrateful children. Buried. Lost and forgotten. Until the early 1800s. . ."

Controversy raged over what might be genuine Gregorian chant as resurrected. But no one knew for sure, for there was no starting point, no benchmark against which to compare. So *The Beautiful*



Mystery remains one still. . . . And lies at the heart of this novel where the choir director of the monastery of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups, secluded in Québec's wilderness, is murdered.

Louise writes in the Acknowledgments that she too has a fascination with music "and a very personal and baffling relationship with it." Like me, she finds it transformative and acknowledges neuroscience that links music with brain function. I'm sure I've read that studying is enhanced by listening to baroque music, its harmonies and rhythms inducing better concentration. Certainly this works for me. When my husband turns up jazz at the other end of the house, I get jangled when I hear it, feel edgy. Various mystery writers I know, notably Michael Connelly, Ian Rankin, and Peter Robinson, have discussed with me and with readers how they listen to jazz when writing; So too does John Harvey. So their brains react differently than mine, and no doubt to each other's, when music is playing. And informs their writing.

The other fascination I have with *The Beautiful Mystery* is its structure, a marvelous adaptation of a classic form: the country house murder.

What do I mean when I talk about the geometry of crime fiction? There are more or less four shapes. The closed circle wherein all the suspects dwell and the detective is either on the spot at the outset or brought within it. The thriller where the circle opens out into a path or road down which the protagonist(s) and antagonist(s) chase each other. The megaphone shape of novels of suspense that build from a small beginning to a crescendo, much like Wagner's *Liebestod* if you listen to it. And finally, the caper, where the lines of the circle, the road, or the megaphone fragment into pieces that end up fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle if the caper is successfully designed. (Appositely "transformation geometry" can be applied to music). I have had some fascinating discussions on this topic with Professor B. J. Rahn of Hunter College and others at Malice Domestic, and with a number of British crime writers.

The village mystery, the country house murder, the murder taking place in a theater or on a ship or, as in a memorable Nero Wolfe novel, inside a banquet room, takes the closed circle shape. The victim and some number of suspects are gathered together; ingress or egress from the circle is limited (maybe a blizzard engulfs a house, or the ship is at sea); and a sleuth whether an amateur with special skills or a policeman or a consulting detective is introduced. Some of the suspects have secrets, some may have none, or as in Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, a classic closed circle, everyone but the sleuth shares one big one. Alibis, red herrings abound. And often if the plot is diabolically clever, it takes a second murder or more to expose the culprit(s).

I bore you with this because I am so impressed with the way Louise has used this traditional form in her work, especially in *The Beautiful Mystery*. The community of monks is limited in size. 24 men. It's cloistered, closed to outsiders. It's in the wilderness, limiting access and departure; a stranger could not hide. The monks have taken a vow of silence, although they are allowed to sing. When their choir director is murdered, there is thus a very limited circle of suspects and in this religious community, to suspect anyone is almost unthinkable.

The detectives, Armand Gamache and Jean-Guy Beauvoir, arrive by boat with the local agent, Captain Charbonneau. They are admitted. And locked in. And must rely on traditional detecting tools, observations, interviews, intuition, to guide them. They are on their own, although they text the outside world. And attune themselves to the failings, the passions, the pride and the regrets of the monks, the cracks in that circle where the modern world seeps in.



This is actually thrilling stuff, captivating, puzzling, heart wrenching. Louse has a gift for actions arising out of character rather than the characters serving the demands of the plot. The result is an always unpredictable journey for the reader, a voyage of discovery undertaken with Gamache. Plus here, as I've said, she sets the stage for future stories even though we don't see it at the time but only when we've read future books.

One of the joys of deep reading of mystery, of learning its conventions and tropes and gaining familiarity with landmark books, is being able to admire the skill with which an author takes the familiar and does something new, something unexpected, something complex yet fundamentally simple, something at once familiar and fresh. You can read *The Beautiful Mystery* with joy without knowing anything about crime fiction geometry, but it's a richer experience to see someone engage the levers and give readers an extraordinary reading experience, carrying them out of their world into one like the monastery of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups. And Three Pines.

RECAP (PROLOGUE AND CHAPTERS 1-17)

My Introduction is so long I'm making this short. We begin by talking about music, *The Beautiful Mystery*, and glimpse its history in the Prologue. In Chapter One we move to the modern story where we get a scene in the monastery and meet Dom Philippe. Then we view Armand Gamache's daughter Annie with her lover, his second in command Jean-Guy Beauvoir, who gets the summons to join Gamache as the Scene of the Crime Team sent to the monastery. They will pick up a local agent of the Sûreté when they arrive. My favorite quote in the first chapters of the book ends Chapter One. It is so perfect for this story.

Chapter Two allows us to explore the Québec wilderness as the Scene Team travels by boat through rough country to the isolated community. Then we explore the monastery and enjoy a gradual introduction, an immersion, meeting the monks. A joy of this book is its leisurely pace, free of hurry-up pressures from the outside world despite the texting to and fro.

Gamache and Beauvoir observe and interview the monks, none of whom claims to have a clue as to who killed Mathieu. The abbot says, in Chapter Nine, "I actually believed I could look at them just now and tell. That there'd be something different about him. That I'd just know." Is this naiveté, or is this someone so free of sin himself he truly believes that mortal sin wears a visible face? Our detectives know better. . . .

Gamache asks the abbot, "Who could have done this, mon père?" And the abbot replies, "I don't know. I should know, but I don't." If the leader of the community is so in the dark, cannot see the wolf in his fold, how will two policemen succeed when they have little to work with except their own observations and hearts? (I refer you again to my quote from Matthew 10:36).

Eventually, in Chapter Sixteen, Gamache stands in the garden, the scene of the murder, 24 hours after it has occurred. He stands there with the abbot and he imagines himself in the mind of the killer, and he also wonders if Mathieu had sensed he would be murdered. It had taken him a little time to die, a time when he crawled away from the abbey, towards the dark, away from the light. Animal instinct? Or was Mathieu making some kind of statement?

And then comes Chapter Seventeen and a game changer: the arrival of Sylvain Francoeur, the Chief Superintendent of the Sûreté du Québec, dropping from the sky not on wings but via a plane. The dynamics change. And our chapter ends with Gamache thinking about Saint Gilbert, praying to him. And asking himself, “if it was ever right to kill one for the sake of many?” Is he referring to the murder at the monastery, or to something relating to his superior?

In Chapter One we saw how the relationship between Gamache’s daughter Annie and his second, Jean-Guy, had developed. As we move along they are now apart, communicating by text, their own closed circle broken. This is a major thread to follow as the story unfolds. What signals are there to this point about how it will go for them?

FAVORITE QUOTE

Anne Daphné Gamache, Matthew 10:36

“And a man’s foes, shall they be of his own household?”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In her Acknowledgments, Louise mentions the neuroscience of music, its effect on her creativity, its effects on our brains. How does listening to music—and what music you listen to—affect you?
2. Would you read—or reread—*The Beautiful Mystery* while listening to, or after listening to, Gregorian chant? (There’s a surprising amount recorded.) Would you expect to alter your reading experience by doing so?
3. Chief Inspector Gamache’s writ runs to the whole province. Do the books taking him (and other characters) to new corners of Québec enrich your enjoyment or are you happiest when the story focuses on Three Pines? If so, why?
4. Do you find the closed-circle concept works for you when thinking about the structure of the mystery in this book? In any of the others? What challenges does this geometry set the author?
5. The monastery is a cloistered community of 24 men. One of them must be the killer. Did you start asking yourself which of them as you read Chapters 1-17? In other words, are you a reader who likes to solve the mystery or do you prefer to wait for the revelation?
6. Depending on how you answered that, do you read other authors’ mysteries differently?
7. If you have read the books in order as Louise wrote them, by now you know that she plants seeds for future plots. As you read Chapters 1-17 were you struck by anything that might carry forward into a future book?



PART 2

INTRODUCTION

I had some opportunity while in Santa Fe pursuing opera this week to read some of the comments posted on *The Beautiful Mystery*, Part 1.

To address one, Louise has signed each year at The Poisoned Pen since arriving in 2009 with *A Rule against Murder*. On Labor Day, 2012, we webcast the discussion between Louise and me for *The Beautiful Mystery*. As it was part of her book tour it has no spoilers and you can watch it before reading on, or at any time. [Watch here »](#)

Bonus: on Labor Day, 2013, we webcast our discussion of *How the Light Gets In*. It will have some spoilers for *The Beautiful Mystery* but none for *How the Light Gets In*. [Watch here »](#)

And on Labor Day, September 1, 2014, we'll be webcasting Louise talking about *The Long Way Home*. You can click in at 5:00 pm PST or any time thereafter. [Watch here »](#)

You can see we're friends as well as colleagues after an improbable start that began in 2005 when a copy of *Still Life* arrived from Louise's London publisher. I was enchanted by Louise's loving and brilliant reimagining of the village mystery from the Golden Age of Crime Fiction—but set in Canada, Quebec, rather than in England. I imagined that Louise was probably British, although I smiled at the irony of her application of a classic British mystery structure to Quebec, knowing how some of the Québécois have long and vociferously lobbied for separation from Canada, and thus the British Commonwealth. This new author must have an excellent sense of humor, thought I.

Eager to amass and sell tons of copies, I soon learned that the publisher had mostly sold out its print run. And that Louise was not British but lived in Quebec. The logistics of our usual procedure with outstanding debut fiction, obtaining signed copies of the first printing for customers, were hopeless, involving three countries and shipping nightmares. But I had another string to my bow, Toronto's wonderful Sleuth of Baker Street bookstore, which generously supplied what copies it could and hooked us up with Louise, or rather lured her in to sign them for us. That was the start.

Imagine then our joy (I speak for me and The Poisoned Pen staff) when St. Martin's/Minotaur bought *Still Life* and in time the rest of Louise's work, and with her fourth Gamache, sent her to Scottsdale.

Generally when you as a reader are enchanted with the work of an author, the author's voice, you begin to imagine how that author might be as a person. Creating a sort of hagiography. Only you know if the reality, should you chance to meet the author or observe the author say through the webcast links given above, meshes with your vision of the author. I refer you to one of the quotes I cite below. "*Ecce homo*." Frère Mathieu utters these words when he's dying. Frère Sébastien utters them to Gamache towards the end of Chapter 34. If the meet-the-author experience has been yours, if you in effect "Beheld" the person, then you will understand the relevance of *Ecce homo* in *The Beautiful Mystery*. It can be a risky business, meeting an author, who is, like you, merely human.

Second, let's clear up the Locked Room Mystery. The LRM, or "impossible crime," is a subgenre of



detective fiction, a subset of the closed circle construct. The crime is committed under apparently impossible circumstances and presents a challenge from the author to the reader—work this one out! In the classic LRM the clues are there for the reader to spot but the author is skilled in massive misdirection. If you missed them while reading and went on to The Big Reveal at book's end, it's fun to go back and read the LRM a second time to admire the author's artistry.

Let's apply the LRM to *The Beautiful Mystery*. Frère Mathieu is one of 24 monks living in a cloistered community. He is murdered in the garden, an open space. There are thus 23 possible suspects and the question is, who-dunnit? Often determined by asking, why? Supplying the compelling motive. In *The Beautiful Mystery*, this task is so daunting that an unusual step is taken in Chapter 34 to cause the murderer to *reveal himself*. Gamache has figured out who-dunnit, but he needs verification. "It was a risk," he says, to Frère Sébastien, the man Gamache got to sing the prior's chant in hopes the murderer would react. "But I needed a quick resolution." The detective also asks, who has the means to commit the murder? And the opportunity? Any monk had the means to kill Mathieu. Both Gamache and the abbot eventually work out who was the monk with the opportunity. In the final chapter, they arrive at the motive.

Now suppose that Frère Mathieu was found dead in a windowless cell (his bedroom). The roof fits tightly, with no trap doors or dormers or chimneys or thatch you can raise for exit. The floor is tiled. The door is tightly fitted and of stout oak and has a secure lock. When the monks break down the door (with an axe), the key, the only key, is found in the lock on the inside.

What do we have? Death by natural causes? Suicide (are the means at hand?)? A homicidal angel (or demon) visitation? A clever killer who, most likely, is well alibied? Sometimes this is the first line of investigation: cause of death. And the second is, how-dunnit? Deducing how-dunnit identifies who-dunnit, and the why of it emerges.

An older and rickety example of the LRM can be found in Sherlock Holmes' "The Case of the Speckled Band." I've always felt that the fact the bed is fixed to the floor is such a big clue the rest should have been obvious. The master of the LRM is one John Dickson Carr who wrote copiously, and also as Carter Dickson. Edward D. Hoch is his American analogue. And let's not overlook the Queen of Crime, Agatha Christie, with *And Then There Were None*. And if I could think of the title, a fiendishly clever Reginald Hill mystery.

I felt I should address the LRM from your posts. But, back to *The Beautiful Mystery*. The village Louise imagines is Three Pines. It is not a place where the whole population can either be murdered—or become murderers. Nor can the village credibly become host to a continual influx of victims or killers. Otherwise it's Cabot's Cove.

Three Pines can remain the touchstone, the home base, but Armand Gamache has a broad writ—the whole of Quebec. One reason I like *The Beautiful Mystery* so well is the way Louise sweeps us up and off to a new location, one with an even less porous perimeter and a smaller population of suspects than Three Pines. So she's upping her game by circumscribing the scene of the crime more tightly.

Which brings me to world-building. Introduce a place like Three Pines, or the monastery of Saint-



Gilbert-Entre les-Loups, at once real and not, and you touch upon the power of fantasy, or epic fiction. Some real world rules can be suspended. Three Pines is at once a place to live, and an escape. To observe an investigation there immerses the reader in the village (or the monastery) for an experience with an added dimension to watching an investigation unfold in real time in a real place, say, Los Angeles.

Magical landscapes are luminous, glorious, touch us. Yet dangerous. Edan Lepucki, reviewing Lev Grossman's *The Magician's Land*, another example of world-building, underlines one of Louise's dominant themes: "But enchanted worlds can be as devastating as our own, and good and evil don't bifurcate as neatly as we would like.

Read the discussion on the very last two pages where Gamache, having watched the plane carrying away Jean-Guy Beauvoir, turns to the abbot. And the abbot asks him, "Do you know why we're called Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups? Why our emblem is two wolves intertwined?" Gamache does not know, nor do we, but then the abbot lifts the curtain.... It's a bit Brothers Grimm, a touch of the dark fairy tale, of something scary, feeding the beast within.

World-building goes hand in hand with fandom. Fandom is a community wherein, for readers who've accepted and enjoyed the special world the author has created, something slightly magical, something apart from daily life, happens. And fans bond with other fans to share its magic. And become apostles, spreading the word in a geometric progression. The Poisoned Pen is Diana Gabaldon's home bookstore so we know this progression well.

We may be in a special world with Louise, but real world rules, human strengths, weaknesses, and emotions, remain. In *The Beautiful Mystery*, as in the real world around us, we're looking at orthodoxy vs. change, tradition vs. modernity. Holding on to the core while embracing the new. "Some malady is coming upon us." "Modern times," adds Frère Sébastien. Forcing us to embrace change, so difficult for humans, even monks. Where do the cloistered Ghibertines touch the modern world? Does the one most ready to embrace change, to further change, consciously put himself at risk? Or is he naïve or willfully blind not just to danger to himself but to the danger arising to others? Through fear? Through jealousy? If you are jealous, you fear you won't be able to hold on to what you have or have attained. Jealousy doesn't just apply to sex, or love of others, but to love of self.

History furnishes us with innumerable examples of what can happen when the prospect of change appears, when a rift in a society opens frightening those desperate for it to close. Jewish zealots. Catholic inquisitors. Puritan witch-hunters. Militant Islam. Or a monk who feared another would ruin the (Gregorian) chants—an irony in that, as Louise points out, we don't know how they sounded originally but only as they have come down to us through the development of musical notation. A monk determined to be the guardian of what is, not of what is to come. Or is it that the monk feared exclusion, that he was jealous of his role in the choir. "All I wanted was to sing the chants?...Why wasn't that enough?"

I wonder how *The Beautiful Mystery* reads according to the reader's faith. To what the reader brings to the story. I've already pointed out my own lifelong love for music, for the beauty of the human voice, and emotional/neural reactions to music. But for me, there's more. I made my first trip to



Quebec as a young teen, going from Chicago to Montreal and then to Quebec City, then boarding a small ship and sailing down the St. Lawrence and, making a left turn, up the Saguenay River towards St. Anne de Beaupré. The church/shrine is Canada's Lourdes, an important Catholic pilgrimage destination. To sail towards it on a dark yet starry night, towards an edifice lit like a beacon and with music (I think it was actually a commercial recording of *Ave Maria*, but hey...) pouring forth over the water... It made a beautiful mystery, especially to an Anglican unprepared for such Catholic ritual and ceremony. I've since spent a lot of time in England listening to boys' choirs (St. Paul's, York, Durham, Wells, Canterbury) and tried to imagine those unearthly, incredibly beautiful outpourings translated to a venue like that night on the river—although they are astonishing and beautiful in their home cathedrals. I especially like to hear those voices sing plainchant at Evensong (the sung version of Evening Prayer). I am almost entirely secular, yet the ceremony of the whole is incredibly moving. For the monks living their cloistered life, how much more so. For one, too much so? I wonder what each of you brings to reading the book and how your experiences and beliefs interact with the story. This belongs in "questions", but fits better here.

Finally, I mentioned Louise's genius at seeding plots earlier, her gift for long-range planning, creating story arcs that sweep her characters (and readers) from book to book, propelling us through the series always wondering what next. *The Beautiful Mystery* is about the murder of one monk, but it's also the story of Jean-Guy Beauvoir's journey which begins with a scene with his lover, Gamache's beloved daughter Annie, and travels past confrontation and choice onto an airplane lifting into the sky. We want to call it back. We know his story isn't over. We are fearful and we wonder and we can't wait for the story's continuation. I am in awe of how carefully Louise sets up *How the Light Gets In*—and how surprising it turns out to be.

RECAP (CHAPTERS 18-34)

Chapter 17 brought Francoeur into the picture and has Gamache hoping to see more clearly, not only the monks, his suspects, "But also the motives of the man in front of him. Who'd dropped so precipitously from the skies, with a purpose." We see some of this purpose at Chapter 34, but in fact it will take *How the Light Gets In* to truly illuminate it. So, Gamache and Beauvoir sit in the Blessed Chapel, not quite as one, and ask "whether it was ever right to kill one for the sake of the many." Gamache in asking is thus on track for motive. And identifying the murdering monk.

Chapter 18 develops Beauvoir's story. We learn he hasn't been on Oxy for months, since Gamache confronted him, took away the pills, got him help. This is ominous. Will being in the monastery despite the murder bring Beauvoir peace, or exacerbate his issues? Chapter 19 heats up the war between Francoeur and Gamache, illuminating their mutual loathing, discussing the crime. And so it goes on.

In Chapter 27 we get a good window into Dom Philippe, the abbot, his responsibilities and his sense of failure as the monks' spiritual and physical shepherd. And Frère Sébastien arrives from Rome. Gamache quickly realizes that the murder comes as a surprise to the young man and that he has come, paddled his way to the monastery, for some other reason. He's a Dominican, not a Ghilbertine. Which

is revealed at the chapter's end. Chapter 33 complicates Beauvoir's story with a reintroduction of drugs.

And Chapter 34, in a variation of the classic detective story wrap up (think Nero Wolfe in his study) that plays upon many emotions and pulls together various threads, reveals the murderer and the why of it, propels Beauvoir in an unexpected direction, and prepares Gamache for future confrontation.

FAVORITE QUOTES

"Ecce homo," John 19:5 "Behold the man," spoken by Pontius Pilate and by Frère Mathieu as he was dying.

"Some malady is coming upon us." —TS Elliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Here is the Third Collect from *The Book of Common Prayer for Evensong*, "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night." Is this strictly the province of the Lord, or is it also the province Armand Gamache sees for himself? Is he harsh with himself if he falls short of defending someone from "all perils and dangers"? Should he be?
2. What act and by what person, do you feel is the most evil in *The Beautiful Mystery*? (Hint: malice aforethought is essential to a charge of murder in the first degree).
3. Do you fear change and if so, has reading *The Beautiful Mystery* made you more (or less) receptive? More conscious of accelerating change all around us?
4. Did you exit this book hardly able to wait until Louise's next? If so, why?
5. "Words are effective not because of what they carry in them, but for their latent potential to unlock the accumulated experience of the reader." (Peter Mendelsund) Does this help explain your responses to Louise's work?
6. Are you a Louise Penny reader, or a fan (in the way I discuss both above)? If you are reading this, and posting, does that answer the question?



REAL PLACES OF THREE PINES

ABBEY OF SAINT-BENOÎT-DU-LAC / SAINT-GILBERT-ENTRE-LES-LOUPS



This was the near mythical monastery of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups. The home of two dozen cloistered, contemplative monks. Who had built their abbey as far from civilization as they could get.

It has taken hundreds of years for civilization to find them, but the silent monks had had the last word.

Twenty-four men had stepped beyond the door. It had closed. And not another living soul had been admitted.

Until today. (The Beautiful Mystery, Chapter Two)

Among the most memorable—and visually stunning!—real places in Louise Penny’s canon is the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, the locale that inspired the fictional Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups. The religious affiliation and events of the book bear no resemblance to the Benedictine Monks of the real abbey, as explained by Louise: “it became clear in researching [*The Beautiful Mystery*] that I couldn’t set the book in a monastery, or even an order, that really existed, so I dug into history and found the Gilbertines, an order that actually once existed, but went extinct.”

Situated on the shores of Lake Memphremagog, the real abbey was built in 1912 by Benedictine Monks fleeing the anti-clerical laws in France. The magnificent monastery was commissioned in 1938 with plans provided by the renowned architect and fellow monk, Dom Paul Bellot.



The monks themselves, numbering about 50 in all, devote themselves to obedience and prayer, and are keen practitioners of Gregorian Chant ([See the video](#)).

While very cerebral and spiritual, the Benedictines believe “one must live by the work of one’s hands.” The monks operate their own orchard and cheese factory and the products of their harvest can be purchased at the Boutique de L’Abbaye. Don’t miss “Le Moine,” a cheese very similar to gruyere or the “Bleu Bénédictin,” a soft blue cheese. They also make superb ciders from their own apples—a sweet non-alcoholic blend and their specialty, Le Kir Abbatial, which is a hard cider that pairs exceptionally well with desserts.



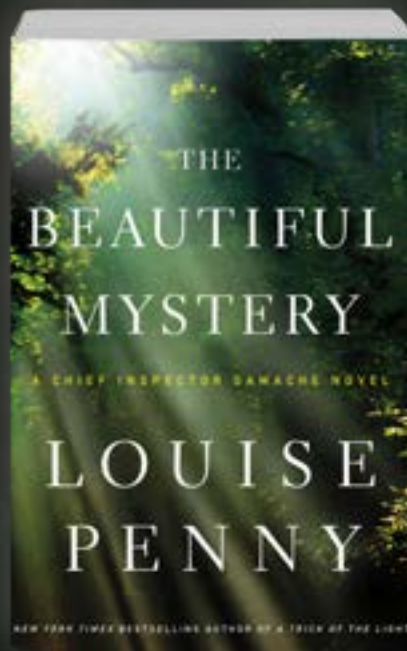
If you're planning on visiting the abbey, make a day of it. Walk the exquisite grounds, attend a mass—whether you're secular or religious—there's nothing quite like it; admire the architecture of the Abbey itself; or, if you're really in search of solitude, stay the night!

For more information, please visit: <https://www.abbaye.ca/en/>

Music is a central theme in *The Beautiful Mystery*. In fact, Louise has said, “a piece of music can transport us to another place and time, and not just evoke that memory, but the emotion. It can inspire great courage, and reduce us to tears.”

Did the Gregorian Chant of the Benedictine Monks evoke any memories and emotions for you?

The Beautiful Mystery is the first of Louise's books set wholly outside of Three Pines. How did you feel about this?



CULTURAL INSPIRATIONS

FROM THREE PINES

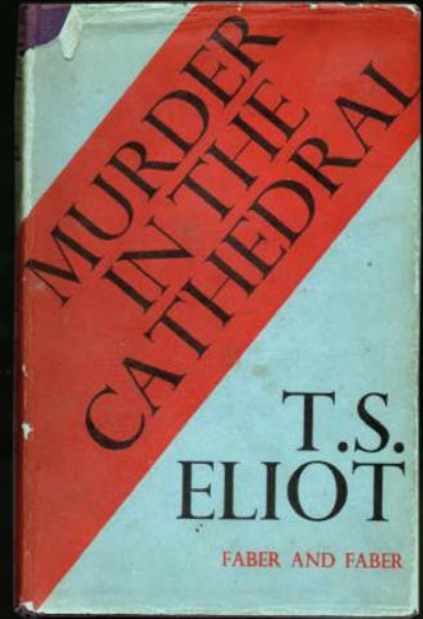


"Some malady is coming upon us," Gamache quoted under his breath. "We wait. We wait." (The Beautiful Mystery, Page 110, Trade Paperback Edition)

Gamache's quote above, as he points out, is a direct line from T.S. Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, and he repeats it in Louise's eighth novel when confronted by an ominous plaque that may hold a clue to murder. Eliot's play is a perfect reference as Gamache has come to the monastery of Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups to investigate a homicide.

Murder in the Cathedral, as Gamache tells the reader, details the assassination of Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Becket, who had a long running feud with King Henry II over the rights of the Church verse those of the Royal Government, was bludgeoned and hacked to death in 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral by way of the King's command. Becket was later canonized as Saint Thomas and today is regarded as the "protector of the secular clergy."



T.S. Eliot, who was also a big inspiration on *The Cruellest Month*, dramatized Becket's story in 1935. Rather than betray his conscience, Becket chose martyrdom, and, knowing Louise, she specifically chose the story of Saint Thomas to illustrate her ongoing theme of morals: right versus wrong, principles, and, of course, the conscience itself.

"Gamache sat up in bed. He knew only two things could give a killer a good night's sleep. If he had no conscience. Or if had a conscience, and that conscience had been an accomplice." (*The Beautiful Mystery*, Page 106)

"You're willing to throw the abbot to the wolves, you just don't want it on your conscience. Instead you imply, suggest. You all but wink at us. But you don't have the guts to stand up and say what you really believe." (Page 230)

"Gamache had seen decent young *Sûreté* officers turned into cynical, vicious, strutting thugs. Young men and women with little conscience and big guns." (page 294)



THE ANNOTATED THREE PINES



FROM PG. 12

Then Annie walked over to the bookcases lining her living room. After a few minutes she found what she was looking for. The bible her parents had given her, when she'd been baptized. For people who didn't attend church, they still followed the rituals.

LOUISE'S THOUGHTS:

Armand and Reine-Marie are like many of their generation, and those who are younger. While not following any particular religion, they have a profound spiritual life and belief. But, somewhat contradictorily, they find the rituals meaningful and comforting. Church at the holidays. Baptisms, funerals, weddings in churches. Though the services themselves might be led by friends. The hymns. Many of the prayers are repeated by the Gamaches. Armand will cross himself, when faced with a body. These are hardwired into us. And offer comfort and some sense of continuity.

FROM PG. 19

At the very end of the bay a fortress stood, like a rock cut. Its steeple rose as though propelled from the earth, the result of some seismic event. Off to the sides were wings. Or arms. Open in benediction, or invitation. A harbor. A safe embrace in the wilderness. A deception.

LOUISE'S THOUGHTS:

Again, this highlights the contradictions many modern Quebecois, and others, find in the trappings of religion. That a church, a monastery, a cathedral could offer both sanctuary and betrayal. That the monastery of St Gilbert, and its occupants, are both of this world, and expelled from it.

FROM PG. 30

"All shall be well," said Dom Philippe, looking directly at Gamache. "All shall be well; and all manner of thing shall be well."

It wasn't at all what the Chief had expected the abbot to say and it took him a moment, looking into those startling eyes, to respond.

"Merci. I believe that, mon père," said Gamache at last. "But do you?"

LOUISE'S THOUGHTS:

I liked exploring, in more depth, Armand's relationship with the institution of religion, and the teachings. His clear displays of respect for the abbot and the other monks, while being aware of recent (and perhaps not so recent) history. I also liked how the abbott could surprise Armand, by quoting a



mystic. And a woman. And I liked that Armand recognized the quote as coming from Julian of Norwich. Not perhaps surprisingly, I have a bracelet with that quote, which I cherish. It was given to me by my editor, Hope Dellon, to celebrate the publication of *THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY*. It proved both the truth and a comfort for what was to come.

FROM PG. 146

Gamache glanced through the leaded-glass window. It made the world outside look slightly distorted. But still he yearned to step into it. And stand in the sunshine. Away, even briefly, from this interior world of subtle glances and vague alliances. Of notes and veiled expressions.

LOUISE'S THOUGHTS:

Here Armand is feeling oppressed, closed in. The peace he had felt at first, is dissipating, as he discovers more and more about the interior life of the monastery and the monks. As he begins to see more clearly what is really happening, and decode what the music really means to them. It's also an allusion to perception, and how it is affected by where we stand. From the inside of St Gilbert looking out, the world is warped. While to many on the outside, looking at the life of these monks, their monastic life is warped, unhealthy. Unnatural. It reminds me of a quote, one I believe I used in an earlier book. When Henry David Thoreau was arrested for civil disobedience (not paying a tax that went against his conscience), Emerson visited him in jail. Emerson asked Thoreau, "Henry, what are you doing in there?" Thoreau replied, "Waldo, the question is what are you doing out there?" Perception. Perspective. Choice.

FROM PG. 52

For the first time, Gamache began to wonder if the garden existed on different planes. It was both a place of grass and earth and flowers. But also an allegory. For that most private place inside each one of them. For some it was a dark, locked room. For others, a garden.

LOUISE'S THOUGHTS:

Again, the theme repeated in many of the books but perhaps most profoundly in this one, of perspective. Of what is 'inside', what is 'out'? Is the purpose of St Gilbert to keep the the devout monks safe from the sins of the outside world? Or the world safe from the monks? Is it a garden, or a wall? Safety or a prison? Is the music a gift from God to be shared? Or a direct line to a Higher Power, meant only for a chosen few? Again, it reminds me of a quote, this time a perhaps apocryphal headline from the London Times. The homes formed a circle, and in its center was the village green. And in the center of that were the pine trees that soared over the community. Three great spires that inspired the name. Three Pines. These were no ordinary trees. Planted centuries ago, they were a code. A signal to the war-weary. When reporting on a spectacularly dense mist, the headline read: Heavy Fog. Mainland Cut Off.

POSTCARDS

FROM THREE PINES



"Just spent a quiet night at the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac. The only sound was the monks singing Gregorian Chants. Hope I can capture this feeling of peace in the book. This really is a "beautiful mystery"."

AN EXCERPT FROM *THE BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY*

The abbot led the small procession, followed by Frères Simon and Charles. Then Captain Charbonneau at the head of the stretcher and Beauvoir behind. Gamache was the last to leave the abbot's garden, closing the bookcase behind him.

They walked into the rainbow corridor. The joyful colors played on the body, and the mourners. As they arrived at the church, the rest of the community stood and filed from the benches. Joining them. Walking behind Gamache.

The abbot, Dom Philippe, began to recite a prayer. Not the rosary. Something else. And then Gamache realized the abbot wasn't speaking. He was singing. And it wasn't simply a prayer. It was a chant.

A Gregorian chant.

Slowly the other monks joined in and the singing swelled to fill the corridor, and join with the light. It would have been beautiful, if not for the certainty that one of the men singing the words of God, in the voice of God, was a killer.



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NATURE OF THE FEAST

CHEESE AND LEEK DISH WITH A CRUNCHY CRUMBLE TOP



Two monks came out of the kitchens carrying bowls of small new potatoes, drizzled with butter and chives. Broccoli and sweet squash and casseroles followed. Cutting boards with warm baguettes dotted the long refectory table and platters of cheeses and butter were silently passed up and down the long benches of monks.

The monks, though, took very little. Passing the bowls and bread, but only taking enough to be symbolic.

They had no appetite.

This left Beauvoir in a quandary. He wanted to drop huge spoonfuls of everything onto his plate until he could no longer see above it. He wanted to make an altar of the food, then eat it. All.

When the first casserole, a fragrant cheese and leek dish with a crunchy crumble top, came by he paused, looking at the modest amounts everyone else had taken.

Then he took the biggest scoop he could manage and plopped it onto his plate.

—The Beautiful Mystery



MAKES 6 SERVINGS

- 4 medium leeks (about 1 pound/450 g)
- 1 cup (3 oz/90 g) grated Cantal, Swiss, or Gruyère cheese
- ½ cup (120 ml) chicken broth
- ¼ cup (62 ml) heavy cream
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cup coarsely crumbled day-old white bread
- ½ cup (1 oz/30 g) grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tablespoons olive oil

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F (191°C).
2. Trim the dark green parts and root end from the leeks, leaving just the white and light green parts behind. Halve the leeks lengthwise, then cut each half across into 2-inch (5-cm) or so pieces. Wash thoroughly and drain. Arrange about half the leeks in an even layer in 9 x 9-inch (22 x 22-cm) baking dish. Scatter the Cantal cheese over the leeks. Top with the remaining leeks.
3. Pour the broth and cream over the leeks. Season with the salt and pepper. Cover tightly with aluminum foil and bake until the leeks are tender, about 40 minutes.
4. Pulse the crumbled bread, Parmesan cheese, and olive oil in a food processor just until the bread cubes are broken up and the cheese and oil are blended through. (The pieces of bread should still be quite large.) Taste and add a pinch more of salt and/or pepper if you think it needs it.
5. Uncover the baking dish, sprinkle the bread mixture over the leeks and bake, uncovered, until the leeks are very tender, the liquid is bubbling and the crumbs are browned, about 20 minutes. Serve hot or at room temperature.
6. If your leeks are particularly thick, woody, or out of season, we recommend blanching them before arranging on the dish.

