



Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac.

Quebec's Mysterious *Eastern Townships*

Follow our intrepid correspondents as they track mystery writer Louise Penny's famous detective Armand Gamache through charming villages to a lakeside manor

By Rob & Wendy Lindsay

The year was 2004 and the place, a rented studio above some shops on the main street of Sutton, QC. Louise Penny, a former CBC Radio journalist and host, had just completed her first mystery novel, *Still Life*. A host of publishers rejected it, but after it was published in 2006, Crime Writers of Canada selected it for that year's Arthur Ellis Award for best first novel and Penny's

new career took off. Today she is a Member of the Order of Canada and has fans all over the world.

Happily for Quebec tourism, Penny has remained true to her locale and set every one of her 13 bestselling novels somewhere in Quebec, most often in the picturesque Eastern Townships ("New England charm with a Quebec flair!" the region's tourism website proclaims). Fans of the books and of Penny's enduring and



endearing hero, Chief Inspector Armand Gamache of the *Sûreté du Québec*, the provincial police force, make their way to the Townships by car and bus, especially from the United States, to see where the stories take place—fans just like us.

With a Three Pines map and an official Eastern Townships map in hand, we set off on a delightful car

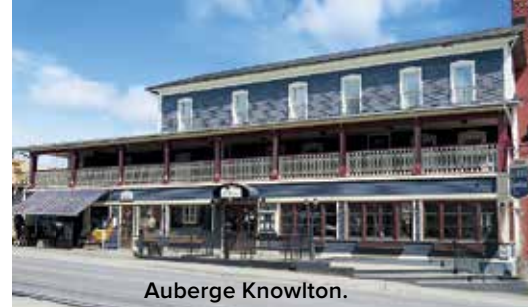
Covered bridge, Notre-Dame-de-Stanbridge



The Old Mill, Stanbridge.



Auberge Knowlton.



- ★ *The Beautiful Mystery*
Abbey of Saint-Benoit-du-Lac
- ★ *Brutal Telling*
Knowlton
- ★ *How the Light Gets In*
Lac-Brome (Knowlton)
- ★ *The Cruellest Month*
Sutton
- ★ *Brutal Telling*
Sutton Junction
- ★ *Dead Cold*
North Hatley
- ★ *Dead Cold*
Georgeville
- ★ *Still Life*
Knowlton
- ★ *The Murder Stone*
North Hatley
- ★ *Still Life*
Stanbridge East



Historic building, Frelighsburg.



Ernest Gaffer offers a taste of his winery's Fire Cider.



L'Orpailleur vineyard.

Photos: Three Pines Inspirations Map (Brome Lake Books); Tourisme Québec/Jean-François Bergeron/Enviro Foto (vineyard and building); Lindsay Editorial (others); Photos: Ville de Lac-Brome/Claude Bergeron (auberge); Lindsay Editorial (alpacas); Brome Lake Duck Festival (food).

trip through the pastoral splendour of the landscape.

Spring, with its fresh green hillsides and blossom-laden orchards, and fall, with its crimson trees and roadside apple stands, are ideal times to tour the Eastern Townships. The winding country roads are fairly quiet, not yet crowded with the ski and snowmobile crowds of winter or the campers and trailers of summer tourists.

We skirted south of Montreal on Autoroute 30 East (Aut. 10 East is another main route to the Townships from Montreal), then headed south on Aut. 35 South.

The first Europeans came to this area from France, England, Scotland, and Ireland. Then came the Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution. According to folklore, three pine trees

became the signal that Loyalists were welcome in a village.

The fictional village of Three Pines, where most of Penny's novels are set, was inspired by Frelighsburg, QC. We located this pretty little village nestled among rolling hills less than four kilometres (2.5 miles) from the Vermont border.

Gamache describes Three Pines in the most recent novel, *Glass Houses* (2017): "Not so much remote as off the path," explained Gamache. "People mostly come upon Three Pines because they're lost. It is not the sort of place you drive through on the way to somewhere else." The description applies to Frelighsburg, as well. The village was founded in 1790 by Loyalists. Today, among the many handsome historic buildings, the old general store with its gingerbread

front is most notable. It's now a café known for its maple syrup pie.

The nearby village of Stanbridge East seems almost untouched by time. The picturesque Cornell Mill, mentioned in *Still Life*, stands as it has since 1830. On the side of the mill, overlooking a dam in the Pike River, is a waterwheel poised to turn. Within its fieldstone and brick walls, the mill houses a museum of the Loyalist years.

The 2013 TV movie of *Still Life* was shot in and around Stanbridge East, and the lovely old mill figured prominently. Across the river, the former Cecil Hotel, built in 1849, has been refurbished and renamed The Old Mill 1849. It is once again an auberge, with five rooms upstairs and a large restaurant/bar on the main floor that serves

locally sourced food and beverages. You can certainly understand its welcoming wooden expanse becoming the set for Olivier and Gabri's Bistro in the *Still Life* movie.

One side of our Townships map laid out a wine route. Heading east again, we approached Dunham and the *Vignoble de l'Orpailleur* winery. In business for 35 years, it was the first commercial winery in Quebec. Edith Ducharme explained that the company's vineyards are located where they get the sunniest hours in Quebec. "We have the perfect weather for grapes—once we get the vines through the winter." A tour of the cellars gave us a new appreciation for the hours of work and the expertise behind each bottle.

A short distance down the road was *Union Libre*, where owners Sylvie and Ernest Gaffer gave us a taste of their unique Fire Cider, created with heat to intensify the aroma and taste. Their orchard was loaded with tasty apples.

In addition to 19 vineyards, the Townships map also highlighted 10 agri-tourism stops featuring a range of highlights: cheese, orchards, ducks, alpacas.... We had been told of a newly opened on-farm boutique at Norli Alpaca Farm and headed off to investigate.

The alpacas are cute—smaller than llamas, more like long-legged, long-necked sheep. They seemed very friendly and curious. Owner Lise Pollender brought a young one over for us to pet and we discovered a coat softer than wool and containing no lanolin, a feature that, Pollender explained, makes it hypoallergenic. In her new boutique overlooking the pastures of grazing alpacas, she showed us every type of knitwear you could imagine: sweaters, socks, scarves, hats, gloves, and shawls, plus blankets and bedspreads. Pollender told us that alpaca wool has a natural crimp that makes it well-suited for knitting and weaving.

It's also light, warm, and water-repellent, and while it can be dyed, it comes in more than 50 natural shades and it's more popular to leave it natural. The boutique's balls of knitting yarn, spun in a mill on the farm, are extremely popular with knitters.

Our stop for the night was at the Auberge Knowlton, on the southern shore of Lac Brome in the village of Knowlton/Lac Brome in the village of Knowlton, where Penny lives. (While Knowlton is now one of seven villages officially grouped together as Lac Brome, most locals still refer to it as Knowlton.) The Auberge began its days as a stagecoach inn called Blinn's Inn. Over the years, it underwent many transformations until the current owners, Signy Stephenson and Michel Gabereau, gutted and

Above: Norli Alpaca Farm. Right: The Brome Lake Duck Festival.

completely renovated it, taking the old inn back to its historic roots and furnishing it with antiques.

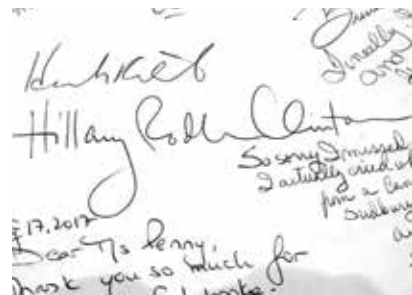
The dining room, *Le Relais*, specializes in steak and local Brome Lake duck. The duck confit and filet mignon duo is *delicious*. Penny has likely been to the Auberge's famous weekly *steak-frites* night, which brings folks by the carload from the surrounding area, for she refers to it in *Glass Houses*.

Every September, Knowlton hosts the Brome Lake Duck Festival, with





Bookstore owner Danny McAuley. Right: Hillary Rodham Clinton's signature.



Ripplecove Hotel & Spa on Lake Massawippi.



Manoir Hovey.



Three Pines corner.



The Cafetier Sutton.

culinary demonstrations, music, children's activities, and yellow duck feet painted on the sidewalk in front of all the participating businesses. The local duck farm has definitely put Lac Brome on the culinary map.

We wondered if Duck Days had been the inspiration for Penny giving crotchety old Ruth a pet duck in her novels.

On Knowlton's main street is Brome Lake Books, the bookstore that is the model for Myrna's bookstore in the

novels. It is here that Penny officially launches all her books. The launches were once held inside the bookstore, with larger crowds spilling out onto the veranda, but now a large marquee is erected in the adjacent Three Pines Park and tickets sell out in less than 24 hours.

Bookstore owner Danny McAuley pointed out the bookstore's Three Pines corner—a couple of comfy chairs by a fireplace, shelves filled with Penny's mysteries, and a guestbook in which you can leave a message for Penny. We signed just a few pages away from Hillary Rodham Clinton, who, along with Bill, visited the area last summer at Penny's invitation. (The bookstore is moving into a new location just across the street in May but will maintain a space dedicated to Penny.)

Across the street from the bookstore is the Star Café, one of Penny's favourite stops. Housed in an old tannery dating back to the 1800s, the Star is a *café de village*, one of a network of 17 *cafés de village* scattered around the Townships. Each is unique, but they have a few things in common: they are owner-operated and serve fresh coffee plus herbal teas and local and seasonal products, usually fresh-baked goods plus light meals. The atmosphere is warm and friendly and there's always free Wi-Fi. *Cafés de village* are becoming the social heart of each village, with bulletin boards full of meetings, classes available, and items for sale. They are worth searching out on your smartphone because their pale-green banners are difficult to spot.

The next morning, we headed off for breakfast at The Cafetier Sutton, the *café du village* in the nearby town of Sutton. We followed the Townships Trail, a beautiful drive with vistas of autumn-cloaked hillsides, past many small farms and country homes, one of which once belonged to Penny and her late husband, Dr. Michael Whitehead.



The old general store in North Hatley.

The beautiful mountain village of Sutton is popular year-round with those who love outdoor activity—skiing, snowboarding, and cross-country skiing in winter, and cycling, hiking, and kayaking in summer. Mid-season, it's a charming quiet spot that Penny turned into the fictional village of St. Remy.

A friendly barista and old wooden floors and brick walls give Le Cafetier Sutton a warm, convivial atmosphere. Boxes of books and toys in one corner indicated that families are welcome.

Next door is one of Penny's favourite places, the historic bakery called La Rumeur Affamée (mentioned in *The Cruellest Month*, 2008), which is run by her friends Kelly and Wayne Shanahan. On one side of the shop, old-style glass cases display wonderful cheeses and desserts. On the other side are cases of fresh cookies still warm from the oven and bins of crispy baguettes and mouth-watering croissants just begging to be taken home. Some of Kelly's baking has been the inspiration for the bistro food described in many of Penny's novels.

Farther down the main street, directly across from the town hall, is A L'Abordage Microbrasserie, one of more than a dozen microbreweries in the Eastern Townships. Housed in one of the oldest buildings in Sutton, the microbrewery specializes in British and American-inspired beers, and their pub-style food is delicious. We recom-



Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac.

mend a flight of mini-beers and their very decadent duck poutine.

A short distance north, we came to Sutton Junction and found the Church of St. Aidan just as Penny describes it: "On the side of the hill leading out of the village was a small white chapel" (*The Brutal Telling*, 2009).

Next we headed for Lake Memphremagog via the Bolton Pass. Stone spires rising through the trees suggested that we are nearing the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac (*Bury Your Dead*, 2010), a tranquil Benedictine abbey built on the shores of Lake Memphremagog between 1939 and 1941. The architecture is clean, simple, and surprisingly modern. Here 35 monks live according to the monastic rule written by Saint Benedict in the sixth century—a life of work, prayer, and meditation on Scripture. The public is welcome at their daily services and retreats can be arranged.

In 1943, the dark-robed monks began making and selling wonderful cheeses. Our favourite among the 12 varieties was Frère Jacques, a firm cheese with a yellow-orange rind and a delicate nutty flavour. It paired wonderfully well with the crisp Cortland apples the monks sell from their orchard. *Bury*

Your Dead is set entirely in an abbey patterned on Saint-Benoît-du-Lac.

Next we headed north through the town of Magog and then east to the lovely little lakeside village of North Hatley. The old general store on Main Street bears a weathered brass plaque on its red brick storefront that reads JEAN B. LE BARON LTD EST 1888. What Penny wrote of the store in *The Brutal Telling* remains true today: the store sells *everything!* Groceries, meat, and produce fill the main floor, and a cornucopia of gift, specialty kitchen, and seasonal items fills the second floor. The wooden stairs creaked underfoot and a busy clerk looked up with a welcoming smile as she loaded shelves, assessing immediately that we weren't locals, because she knows them all.

Our final stop on the Three Pines trail was nearby Manoir Hovey, a.k.a. Hovey Manor, a five-star inn known to Penny fans as Manoir Bellechasse (*The Murder Stone*, 2009). Built as a summer home in 1900 by a wealthy American from Atlanta, Georgia, it's long been a busy place, with many regular clients enjoying a weekend in the country, but since the Clintons's stay last year, it's been packed with Americans.

Penny fans can check the Manoir's website for the occasional offering of a "Vive Gamache" mystery package. In the cozy lounge, a glass bookcase has signed editions of Penny's books for sale. And one afternoon, while strolling the Manoir's gardens, you just might spot the author relaxing in a sunny lawn chair.

The Eastern Townships is such a lovely area that it's reassuring to know it can easily be revisited any time you open one of Penny's novels.

For more information, visit easterntownships.org, where you can download a Three Pines map and find links to all the towns and villages we visited. ■

Photos: Lindsay Editorial.

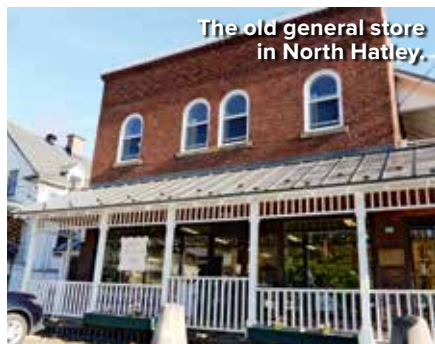
Photos: Courtesy of Hovey Manor (manoir), Lindsay Editorial (others).



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