

## EDITOR'S NOTE

It has been a banner year for murder mysteries. Almost all my favorite sleuths reprised their roles in delectable tales of homicide and detection: Jacqueline Winspear's Maisie Dobbs; Walter Mosley's Easy Rawlins, Tana French's Dublin Murder Squad and Peter Robinson's Alan Banks all confronted murders grisly, ingenious, vengeful or political. My favorite contemporary mystery writer, Louise Penny, served up a shocking new challenge for Chief Inspector Armand Gamache (in my mind, the Atticus Finch of detective fiction) that involves opioids and ethics.



MARY ANN  
STEINER

Murder mysteries and other thrillers make up a large percentage of book sales in the United States. But no matter how esteemed the author or well crafted the plot, such tales are always considered “escape literature.” How interesting that so many of us are drawn to a subject that in real life is the only thing we never can escape — death. We can prepare, prolong, deny, delay, rationalize or rage against the dying of the light, but in the end, nobody gets out alive.

There are a number of theories about why we are so drawn to murder mysteries in the books we read, the movies we watch and the television series we follow. The one I find most plausible is that we find in such stories a sense of justice and a triumph of reason that we can't have in real life. What justice is there when the scholar of writing and wordplay dies of a brain-numbing glioblastoma? What possible reason could there be for the child playing in the backyard last week to be dead from a virulent infection today? Whether it is Sherlock Holmes' maddeningly rational mind, or Armand Gamache's keen sense of justice, there is some comfort in the fact that in these fictional tales mysteries can be solved. We know enough that the real mystery of life and death encompasses more than human inclinations toward justice and reason can accomplish.

Our regular readers know we occasionally include original poetry to complement the topic at hand. We invited Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, poet and professor of American Catholic studies at Fordham University, to write for this issue and — oh, happy fate — she has allowed us first publication of several poems she wrote based on writer

Flannery O'Connor's thoughts about her illness and impending death. The poems are touching and witty, and we hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

Kathleen Benton, DrPH, has been an excellent guest co-editor for this issue. She not only wrote an intriguing article about improving communication among members of clinical teams, patients who are dying and their loved ones, but also led us to several of the other authors in these pages. You'll notice your magazine is a little thicker than usual — we wanted to make sure we included all these authors who have written powerful, insightful and innovative approaches to advance care planning, caring for those who are dying, expanding the scope of palliative care, resisting assisted suicide and coping with loss.

When Chief Inspector Armand Gamache is asked to address the new class of cadets at the Sûreté du Québec about what they might need to know to do their jobs well, the cocky, clever, ambitious agents-to-be are surprised to hear his advice that there are four simple sentences they will need to use regularly: “I was wrong. I'm sorry. I don't know. I need help.” They are not such different sentences than what Ira Byock, MD, identified in his book, *The Four Things That Matter Most*, as what we need to be able to say before we die: “Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.” For those of us in Catholic health care witnessing to and caring for people who are dying, we must cling to the humility of admitting what we don't know, asking forgiveness for what we did wrong and growing our collaborative skills so we can ask for help when we need it. For those of us who are preparing to die — and as Fr. Tom Nairn, OFM, explains in his article, we all are — we need to ready ourselves with forgiveness, gratitude, virtue and love.

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